

ST AGATHA'S NOVENA – 31st JANUARY 2024

Praying for Healing – John de Quidt

Tonight, I would like to share with you part of my story. It begins in Holy Week 1985 when I was invited a service at a church in Banstead. I thought it was about being healed, but, in fact, it was about how to pray for people to be healed.

Two days later I was leading a prayer group on an Easter retreat. About half way through the hour set aside for this, totally out of the blue, in response to I don't know what, a young woman suddenly broke down in tears. And as she wept, she cried out asking God to heal her.

Have you ever felt a sense of inevitability, of being swept along by a tide of events you can't control? Two days previously, I'd been told what to do. Suddenly this wasn't some nice bit of theory. This was real. No escape, nowhere to hide.

So we all gathered around her, we laid hands on her and we prayed as best we could. And she cried and she cried. Then she dried her tears and she smiled. Later she told us that she had been suffering from anorexia and bulimia for 8 years and was feeling utterly desperate. But she walked out of that room totally and permanently healed.

Now we were very aware that she had been healed not by us but by God. But it also left us with a feeling of joy and, dare I say it, excitement at having seen God so powerfully at work and at having been part of it. My immediate reaction was that I wanted to know more. And it is some of that joy and excitement that I want to convey to you this evening. I want to look at how we cannot merely witness to God's healing love but can share it in a practical way with His wounded suffering people.

Right let's start with a fundamental point. God loves His people. He does not want us to suffer and, as Jesus made clear, He does not make us suffer as a punishment for our sins. No, God wants good things for His people. His healing is a free gift.

A quarter of the Gospels is about Jesus healing people. But and this is important, Jesus was not just a loving, caring, wandering healer or miracle worker. Many of the crowds probably followed Him because that's what they thought He was. Every healing also had a deeper purpose.

In his book, *the Healing Powers of the Sacraments*, Fr Jim McManus explains it much better than I can, like this:

"Christ's miracles are signs of the future triumph of God's kingdom. They are not in themselves the presence of the full reality of the Kingdom. The last enemy, death, already defeated in Christ, has still to be defeated in us. Jesus did not come simply to banish sickness or suffering or death here and now. He came to establish the reign of God in our hearts, and when God reigns triumphantly in His Kingdom among us, His Kingdom which is still to come, all sickness and death will be abolished."

In other words, when Jesus healed people, this was not an isolated act of gratuitous kindness. No, it was a clear sign and an integral part of His proclamation of the Kingdom of God. That proclamation continues today. Jesus' last command to His disciples in Mark 16 sums it up: *"Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Gospel to all creation"*. He then explained the signs that would be associated with believers. These included: *"They will lay their hands on the sick who will recover"*.

Note carefully: "These are the signs that will be associated with believers." Not some believers, not an elite of super-spiritual believers, not ordained believers, nor even those with a particular calling, but all believers. That includes you and me.

Much of our suffering and sickness are the consequence of the Fall, described theologically in the story of Adam and Eve. That damaged our relationship with God and with other people. We are all wounded people. When we pray for somebody to be healed, we are, therefore, asking God, above all else, to restore and strengthen His relationship of love with that person. You will see, therefore, that it is not just the gravely ill that need healing. We all do.

Healing is about the whole person. If you think about it, this is entirely logical. It has been estimated that 75% of all sickness is, at root, mental, psychological or spiritual. What makes us ill or slows our recovery when we are physically unwell? Stress, fear, rejection, loneliness, anger, bitterness, a negative self-image, being unable to forgive those who have hurt us, and so on. And what is the answer to every one of these? It is unconditional love, the love that only God can give.

Prayer for healing does not replace or invalidate the Sacraments. It adds an extra dimension that is open to all of us. We can and indeed should pray for those around us. How do we pray? There is no right way. The great Abbott Parry of Ramsgate said "Pray as you can, not as you can't". Pray in whatever way you feel comfortable, silently or out loud, but make sure that the person for whom you are praying knows it. And if somebody asks for prayer, don't put it off. Do it right then. Be alert to the circumstances and to the location. Praying at the bus stop won't be the same as praying in church. If appropriate you can hold their hand or lay a hand on their shoulder, but respect their privacy.

Healing is therefore not necessarily the same as the cure of a physical illness. A person may be completely healed, but still be suffering severely or even fatally ill. If you think about it, the ultimate form of healing is total union with God, which can only be found in death. That doesn't mean that God won't heal the physically sick. He does, though not always in the way that we (or they) want or expect.

So, when you pray for someone, don't worry about how you pray. God is interested in what is in our hearts not in how articulate we are. Our role is merely to pray sincerely and with love, asking God to fill our brother or sister with His love, His life, His joy, His peace, His healing. Feel free to tell people that God loves them and that He will always be with them, but don't promise a physical cure unless you are sure that is what God is saying to you. Don't worry if there is no obvious immediate change. Hand the situation over to God – who is the great healer.

To summarise. Jesus told His followers – that's you and me – to go out and proclaim the coming of the Kingdom. One of the most powerful ways of doing so is to pray for the sick and suffering that they might be healed and find a new or stronger relationship with Him. I have been praying for people to be healed for nearly 40 years. And, I can tell you, God hears and answers the prayers of His people.