

A sermon preached by the Revd. Nigel Guthrie at Holy Cross, Crediton
on 24 August 2014 at 9.30am

Prayer for Healing

When the washing machine breaks down, which is usually some time after the warranty expires, most of us have to phone up an expert to come and mend it. They will diagnose what is wrong and put a new part in and then, of course, send us the bill!

In our series of sermons about prayer I will be speaking this morning about prayer for healing and I will explain later about the washing machine. But there is far more to say about prayer for healing than I could possibly fit into one sermon and if you'd like some further reading I have put some accessible books at the back which you would be very welcome to borrow.

St James writes this in chapter 5 of his letter:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

We know that from the earliest times of the church Christians prayed at their gatherings for those who were ill, and remembered those who had died, practices we continue to this day. And as well as the public prayers at the intercessions in the service we also have a Prayer Ministry Team who meet in the Friends Chapel during the administration of communion. You are always welcome to go and ask for prayers for yourself or someone that you are concerned about. And another way of asking members of the church to pray for yourself or somebody else is to contact our prayer chain. Keith Barker kindly sends out the requests for prayer and members of the prayer chain can then offer them up in their own time. And finally anyone is free to ask myself or any member of the clergy to pray for them or with them and people who are confined at home for some time are also very welcome to ask for communion at home which can be brought by one of the clergy or pastoral team.

The more people who are involved in regular prayer the more effective I believe it will be. So if you would like to be involved in praying for others at Holy Cross please do come forward and let someone know.

So what about the faulty washing machine? Unless we are top washing machine engineers we normally have to contact someone to mend it. There is a lot of wisdom in this. When my Mum moved into Creedy Road I foolishly agreed to connect her washing machine. It was sometime later that the leaks which followed meant that she had to have quite a bit of the flooring replaced!

When we are broken, when we are ill, suffering physically or mentally, when we are worried or anxious it's good to ask for help and for prayer. It's also good, just like mending the washing machine, to work out what the problem is. If we have broken a leg then this is obvious. But many things which afflict us have deeper causes. Sometimes we have broken relationships to deal with. Or there may be hurts going back a long way, even to childhood, for which we must seek healing.

So like the broken washing machine we need to ask when we need healing and we need to recognise what is causing our pain. But unlike the broken washing machine, healing for us is not just about

replacing a faulty part. We can see this just by considering a common operation like a hip replacement. However good the new joint is and however well the surgeon carries out the operation its success will also depend on how fit we were before the operation and on how well we heed the advice and do the prescribed exercises after it.

I'm not just using the example of a broken washing machine for light relief. Our modern approach to medicine can lead, or rather mislead, us to think that we can be fixed as easily as the washing machine. But we are complex inter-related beings; that is related to others and to the varied aspects of our own beings. As the Jewish and Christian traditions of faith show us we are both physical and spiritual beings and those aspects are not to be divided. Our bodies, our minds, our relationships, our emotions and our faith are all closely related. When we pray for healing it is to pray for wholeness for every aspect of our lives. It's that wholeness in every aspect which I believe God wants for us.

If we return for a moment to the example of a hip replacement, we know that if as sometimes happens it is delayed it can lead to a great deal of pain. It becomes hard to move and we can become depressed because we can't get out easily, and as pain can make us irritable it can also put a strain on our relationships.

Of course good doctors take the time to understand the connections between different aspects of their patients' lives and will realise all too well that what they do is only a part of the picture of healing. I believe that's true for our prayers for healing as well. It's very dangerous to claim, as some do, that once a person is prayed for they can forget about their medication or treatment. I believe that good medical care is one of God's gifts to us and that our prayers should sit alongside proper medical attention.

It is a wonderful thing to see someone we have prayed for healed, as I have myself. Is a great encouragement to our faith as well as to the person who has been healed. But part of praying for healing is also coming to terms with the fact that healing does not always take place as we might want it to. And that's what makes prayer for healing a challenge to us. It reminds us that God's will for us is not always what we might first want. It also reminds us that, as Christians, the greatest good we can want for anyone is that they should know God and be known by him, in love. That's why even when someone for whom we have been praying dies it does not represent a failure in our prayers, even though their death might be very painful to us. To be united with God in heaven is the greatest healing of all for us and if we are privileged to accompany someone who is approaching their own end with faith and hope then it can be a truly joyful thing.

When we pray for healing, whether it's in a public service like this one or whether it's privately on our own or with another person, we should remember that it is a privilege. It's a privilege both because that person has asked for our prayers and that God has chosen us to minister to them through prayer. We should pray for discernment to know how we should pray best. We should pray remembering the whole person and all that affects their well-being. And finally we should pray with unwavering faith that God will bring about his healing for them in his time and in his way.

Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you that during your life you brought healing and wholeness to so many:
We thank you for giving us a share in the ministry;
May we bring healing to others through our care and concern,
Through our friendship and fellowship, and through our prayers.
Through us may your will be done. Amen.