

DYING AND HEALING

Rabbi Lionel Blue told the story of the elderly Jew knocked down by a car and fatally injured. A Roman Catholic priest rushes up to him and says, “Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.” The Jew replies, “Here I am dying and the man is asking me riddles already.”

No, the time of dying and death is not the time for asking riddles, or even becoming involved in theological reflection. It is a time for the assurance and consolation faith can bring. But, on other hand now is the time to contemplate dying and death.. A tutor at my theological college urged all of us students to meditate on our own deaths often.

Fine, you might say, but how has dying and death a place in a course of sermons on healing? Well, we will see in a moment. But first let me turn to a word that has been used a number of time in this course sermons – wholeness.

When I talk about the healing ministry I prefer to use the word wholeness. For, to me, the idea of wholeness has a greater breadth and depth than the word health.

The World Health Organisation came up with a definition of health. *The level of functioning or metabolic efficiency of a living organism, free from injury, illness or pain.* A rather mechanistic view of health. And a long way from what I understand as wholeness. A little better is this definition; “A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Again a rather idealised idea of health, that there will be complete physical, mental and social well-being.

There are some who would be excluded from the WHO definition of health. In an interview in the Observer, Evelyn Glennie, the famous percussionist says, “I'd love to go back to the times when we lived in caves. Research says people used their whole bodies to listen, bringing all of their senses together. Evelyn Glennie has good reason to make this remark because, of course, she has been deaf since the age of 12. Excluded from those definitions of health, yet definitely not excluded from wholeness. A wholeness reflected in those words – people used their whole bodies to listen, bringing all their senses together. (also paralympics – limbs missing – fitter than me!)

Wholeness means a whole lot more than physical health. For it includes a relationship with the world; loving others, showing compassion and generosity, appreciating art, music and literature. A injured or sick person may be made physically healthy by medics, but if he goes on to live a selfish, miserly life, always complaining, never relating generously with others, that person will not have been made whole.

In the story of the woman cured of a haemorrhage Jesus says to her, “Woman your faith has made you whole”. And that was especially true of this particular healing. The woman's disease would have made her “unclean”, causing her to avoid contact with others. She was made “whole”, cured physically and also brought back in to relationship with people and the world around her.

A Greek word used in the stories of Jesus' healings can mean “made whole” in a medical context, and “saved” in a theological context. The words “whole” and “wholeness” are used to describe a state of being to which we grow, when all shall be made on one Christ. I will come back to that; for the moment, suffice it to say that for a person of faith, “wholeness”

will be under-girded by our relationship with the very ground of our being, which Christians call God.

In a talk on this theme Laurence Freeman, leader of the WCCM, asks two questions, “What about ageing? “What about death?” How do we relate these to the idea of wholeness?

First, ageing. More and more people are spending more and more fortunes on denying or resisting or trying to reverse the ageing process. So is that a medical condition or merely a technological problem that we have to solve, maybe not just through creams and gels and injections but also maybe through organ transplants and technical miracles?

And then, what about death? Here's the opening paragraph of an article in the Guardian I read recently:

As a man in my mid-30s in the year 2015, I spend the bulk of my life diligently and repeatedly carrying out one simple task – ignoring the prospect of my inevitable death. It's quite easy. Partly because I don't appear to be imminently approaching my demise, but mainly because I've successfully barricaded myself inside an impenetrable fort of shiny distractions.

If I notice a story about a freak accident that resulted in a tragic death I bury my head in Netflix for a bit. When I realise that I am incrementally growing closer to the average age of people mentioned in obituaries, I stab at a bunch of strangers on Assassin's Creed until the tightness in my chest goes away.

And so he continues on this theme. And no I don't know what Netflix or Assassin's Creed are, something digital, but never mind. His words are a reminder that the awareness and fear of death is never far from the surface and how we suppress the

fear of death. Is death a medical condition?” asks Freeman. Do we approach death just in terms of clinical procedures which ultimately fail. Because death is a failure in the medicalised view of health, the purpose of which is to keep you alive.

Laurence points out that St. Benedict has another approach. He says rather than trying to avoid the subject of death always remember that you are going to die. Like my college tutor he advises to always keep death before your eyes. Now he doesn't mean going around thinking about death all the time, but don't repress it. Benedict is not being morbid. He is expressing a universal spiritual practice which you will find in Buddhism and elsewhere of being aware, being mindful of the fact you are mortal. The consequences of this is that you are set free. All that energy that goes into the repression of death is set free..

And hey! This is also about wholeness. Death is part of the whole picture of life and therefore it needs to be integrated. To try and suppress thoughts about dying and death is to try and suppress an essential part of living.

The awareness and acceptance of death and the things that we associate with it, the suffering and loss are not easily things to face, but if we do so Laurence Freeman tells us that the evidence, from a great deal of research done with those who are dying who have their basic physical needs cared for and their pain take care of and their psychological needs being met, and maybe tying up loose ends in their lives. (need to forgive or be forgiven). If this natural and psychological work is being done then many people who are dying who have accepted that they are dying will say “I've never been happier.”

Not every dying person would be able to say that of course, but one who might have done was Denise Inge. Denise's husband

became Bishop of Worcester. She discovered the bishop's house was built over a charnel house, a store of human bones. This prompted her to do a tour of charnel houses in different locations in Europe and write a book called a "Tour of Bones" about all the bones she had visited. Before the book was finished she was diagnosed with incurable cancer.

At the close of the book Denise Inge wrote these words, "We are free, I believe, if we can find it on the inside. Which is the only place from which freedom cannot be wrested, and the only kind of freedom which is abiding." "Contemplating mortality is not about being prepared to die, it is about being prepared to live. And that is what I am doing now, more freely and more fully than I have since childhood. The cancer has not made my life more precious that would make it seem something fragile to lock away in a cupboard. No, it has made it more delicious."

She also wrote, "This is about facing the fear of death. Looking the greatest fears full in the face can open up the cupboards of your life, and throw the dust out."

So facing the reality of death can be a liberating experience, a healing experience, enabling us to accept the totality of our lives not suppressing an important and inevitable part of it. But there is more to it than that. As I have suggested, in a world in which ageing and death are a common experience "wholeness" is not just bodily perfection but embraces a quality of living.

St. John in his Gospel uses the words Eternal Life; this does not mean life that goes on for ever and ever but this essential quality of life, which for St. John is life lived in union with God. Such a life cannot find perfection on earth, for, as St. Paul says, in this life we have this treasure in earthly vessels. Life

can be seen as a journey to wholeness or holiness and holiness simply means sharing in the life of the one who is holy, the One who is one, the One who is whole, God. The journey is complete only when we end our life upon earth when we shall all be one in Christ. Death becomes the final healing.

What that will be like I, of course, cannot tell. What theology calls the beatific vision and which the Bible hints at in images and poetry. St. John says this, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." So I will close with a poem that seems to reflect those words, it's called, "And that will be heaven"

And that will be heaven

*and that will be heaven
at last the first unclouded seeing*

*to stand like a sunflower
turned full face to the sun drenched
with light in the still centre
held while the circling planets
hum with utter joy*

*seeing and knowing
at last in every particle
seen and known
and not turning away*

never turning away again.