

Introduction: This is the 4th of 5 sermons on healing. It is the only one asking a question – which I hope to answer.

The quote itself comes from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12 v 9. There Paul described his persistent thorn in the flesh and how he had begged God to remove this 'messenger from Satan' three times, but in vain. Each time the reply came: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'. We do not know what this 'thorn' was, or even whether it was physical. Some wonder if it was an emotional difficulty or maybe something like a clash of personalities. Usually though, it's accepted as a physical burden which was detrimental to his ministry, 'a thorn to keep me from being too elated'. It must have been so tough to hear that reply every time, the implication clear that the thorn was to show the power of God to the people with whom Paul came into contact. By being reduced to such weakness, he could only be utterly dependent on God alone. Understanding that this graphically demonstrated his complete reliance on God in everything he did, Paul continued 'for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardship, in persecution, in difficulties. For when I am weak then I am strong.'

For us the trouble is we are human beings, frail creatures who don't necessarily react the way Paul did! Last week Paul Fillery spoke about the Hebrew word 'Shalom'. We often use it as a greeting, 'Peace be with you!' but it means more than that. It can indicate friendship, security, contentment, good health, prosperity, and tranquillity of heart and mind, ie the sense of all being well with the world, particularly being right with God, man and self.

So, what do we understand by 'Healing'? The dictionary says it is being made whole, better, even cured. Sometimes I think we really mean the process of getting better. Being unwell in any dimension is uncomfortable; the dynamics of our relationships alter, the balance of power shifts away from the patient so we lose some control and hence a degree of self-confidence. Serious illness often brings loss with it.

It is serious or protracted illness I am thinking about for the purpose of this sermon. A sudden episode of acute but short-lived illness, such as having your appendix out, means the patient is permitted by his friends and family to assume the sick role. This is gradually relinquished as he gets better and the world moves on again. It is not so for those who suffer grave, even life-threatening illness, or whose suffering seems unremitting and whose very foundations shake. That is when the goal posts move.

Stephen Pattison, in his book 'Alive and Kicking', wrote that the role of those who are ill is to wait and see, in faith, if they are going to get better. That way they are regarded as powerless to affect the outcome. However, for those of us who are chronically sick, coping with unceasing, protracted pain or facing a long-term degenerative condition, for example, I believe it's different. Most feel some responsibility for our own healing, whether or not it is physical. Stephen Pattison again: 'the vast majority of contemporary Christians respond to illness and healing in ways which are indistinguishable from those of their non-Christian

neighbours. Mostly they turn to modern medicine or proven methods of alternative medicine for help'.

Recently I reviewed Emily Ackerman's book 'The Amazing Technicolour Pyjama Therapy'. Living in Edinburgh, she was caring for her two young children while working as a doctor in intensive care when she became suddenly extremely ill. Eventually ME was diagnosed. Emily's illness was severe, protracted and changed everything. In due course she had to accept she would be unable to return to medicine, she had to watch her children grow without her physical care as her illness made her so weak she was dependent on a wheelchair, that is, if she was able to get out of bed at all. Emily, the doctor, was on the receiving end. Her losses were profound as she endured the long painful path of patienthood while simultaneously growing in wisdom and stature as a Christian. Turning to the Bible for solace and guidance, she recognised, in the Old Testament, that Joseph's personal battles with rejection by his brothers, imprisonment and resulting disempowerment, mirrored her own. So she used his life as a template. After 23 years she began to recover, but only, as she admitted, after she had accepted that the plans she had made for her life and career were not God's and she had had to trust he had others for her. It has been an enormous struggle but she can now see that good has come from it in unexpected ways.

A few days ago the Times carried an obituary for Charles Jacob, a stockbroker and Methodist Lay Preacher. He was so disillusioned by the manipulative ways of his colleagues in the City of London that, when still a young man, he had a severe mental breakdown. However, when he did return to the City after 3 long years, he was the initiator of the ethical investment movement and showed just how successful it could be. Towards the end of his life he reflected that he would probably never have achieved such success had it not been for the breakdown which caused him and others such pain at the time. It gave him the opportunity to reflect and find an alternative path. He said 'I am absolutely convinced that God uses our sufferings for his own purposes if we allow him.'

Do we agree? Is that our experience? Above all, how do we respond when the chips are down, really down? When we, or those close to us, are beset by suffering of a significant order which challenges every aspect of our lives and shakes our foundations so that we are knocked off balance.... what then?

We are vulnerable human beings and that is how we react. As Stephen Pattison wrote, we are humans first, shaped by our genetic inheritance, our family history, personal experiences, personalities and coping mechanisms. Our responses are governed by all these factors and only when our faith is an integral part of our being, do we turn naturally to our Christian resources. Yet we know that those with a less secure faith will nevertheless turn to God in an emergency too.

Archbishop Robert Runcie commented, during the Iraqi war, that he thought it entirely appropriate for members of the Armed Forces, finding themselves in extremis, to pray instinctively to their heavenly Father. Some were cynical and mocked them for it, he said, but he remained convinced it was the most natural thing to turn to their Creator even if they had never given God a thought before. His words carried the credibility of an officer

who had served in the Scots Guards during the 2nd World War. He was awarded an MC in 1945 and was deeply affected by being one of the first to enter Belsen.

It is not unusual for those who face serious illness to find they cannot pray for themselves. The role of our Christian friends is vital but therein lies the hazard of being exposed to friends like Job's. Emily got frustrated with those who thought their pet theories would definitely make her feel better, or who were sure she wasn't 'right with God'. Job's friends, too, as we know, were initially so appalled when they visited him in his affliction, that they sat with him in silence for a week. He lost absolutely everything, children, land, livestock, wealth and that his friends grew so concerned they desperately kept trying to suggest things he could do to try to end his torment. Most of these related to confessing his sins, to learning more of God's discipline, all ideas which laid the blame on Job. Throughout it all he said little but he never sinned, he never turned against the God in whom he trusted totally. He simply said at the outset, 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Praised be the name of the Lord.' Although he could not understand why God allowed Satan to attack him so severely, he never wavered and in the end, God restored much of what he had lost.

Would we be able to say the same? The importance of Job's story is that it shows how we can turn to God for endurance and deliverance in our struggles. Suffering often makes us step back and reflect more deeply on our lives than hitherto. This may help us form a bond with others who suffer as we develop greater sensitivity to other's pain and difficulties. We are gradually sensitised to suffering in the world.

Almost a quarter of a century ago I was asked to write a book on coping with ongoing protracted severe physical pain. Called *Belief beyond Pain* it was published in 1992, aeons ago now and only part-way through my personal journey. In it I discussed the challenge of doing one's best to keep going when pain dominated every aspect of daily life. Again, I too had well meaning friends who offered their thoughts and prayers and who were sometimes upset when these were not warmly welcomed. 'Jesus doesn't want you like this'. 'If only you could pray more sincerely, why not let so and so lay hands on you....illness is not God's plan for any of us so you simply can't be right with Him!' How did they know, I used to wonder, feeling ever more guilty at letting people down and not being able to overcome my limitations. Like Emily Ackerman I was forced to retire.

In fact I did so 4 times (!). The first was from my job as Principal Social Worker at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore, a postgraduate teaching hospital and a world centre of excellence which treated those with complex orthopaedic problems. One such was a middle aged lady with an extremely painful back. She had consulted doctors galore to no avail, seen chiropractors, osteopaths (sorry Paul), physios, and finally came to us in despair. Again tests showed no abnormality and she failed to respond to every treatment tried, hydrotherapy, traction, rest for weeks in a plaster bed. Nothing worked. During these weeks I got to know her quite well and discovered she lived with her family in South London where her husband ran his own building business, helped by their 3 adult sons. All strong characters with their own opinions, she said the atmosphere at home could be exceedingly charged; in fact, she confessed, 'I just can't stand it!' And that was the vital clue. She subsequently was discharged home in a wheelchair and the men in her

life adapted the house. For the first time ever, they paid attention to the person they had treated as a scivvy, and saw her as she really was: a mother and wife longing to be loved and respected. They gradually changed their ways and attitudes. Was she healed? Certainly not cured, but she had started on the road to healing at least.

In May 1995 I had a heroic operation at the Hammersmith Hospital, done by a professor who recognised the symptoms I described and felt he could do something to help. The result was remarkably successful, and like Emily, after many years I began to improve, slowly at first (for as this dear Christian man said 'you have had 15 years of misery, I hope you will, in time, get back to normal'.) Some friends hailed it a miracle. They disagreed when I suggested it was a successful surgical intervention! Progress began with the discovery that my pancreas had been badly damaged by catching Mumps from my best friend's child in 1980. The pain, which some doctors thought was in my head, was proved to be in my middle. The relief of having a viable diagnosis after so many years was wonderful, that certainly helped the healing process!

It is terrible to admit that I was brought up to think that people like me, who were persistently ill, were wimps, that they didn't want to live normally, I concluded. How wrong I was. I had learnt differently, the hard way!

During some of the most challenging years we lived close to Malling Abbey in Kent and got to know some of the sisters well. It remains an enclosed community of Benedictine nuns, called to a life of silent contemplative prayer. Their generous hospitality to me was wonderful, offering such prayerful support. The sister I was closest to shocked me one day by saying she recognised a lenten quality to my life; in other words, she saw a link between my sufferings and those of Jesus. I really was astonished, never entertaining the idea that a mere mortal could have such an experience. I should have remembered Paul, though. That was why he rejoiced in his sufferings. What a privilege, though it was not a route I would have chosen had I had a choice!

My personal nadir came long after my book had been published - after I had been humbled by letters from grateful readers whose experiences of pain and suffering were probably much worse than mine.

There came a time when pain, sickness and debility dominated the whole of every day. I was neither use nor ornament and worst of all, the medical profession had nothing to offer. We had moved away from our original, kind GP who had persevered in his efforts to help and out of the reach of the London - based consultants who knew me. Now I felt my current GP did not believe in me and the hospital doctors had no clear diagnosis to work on, nobody knew what to do and my new pain consultant ran out of options. In short, there was no hope, and I was making life so difficult for those around me, I wished it would end. I felt quite unable to face, let alone run, the race set before me.

The Apostle Paul wrote about his own struggles to survive and included the remarkable statement that God works for good for those who love him. Really? I read and re-read his letters, especially to the Christians in Rome and Corinth. I was reminded of that thorn in his flesh and God's assertion that it was there to stay as his grace alone was all Paul needed. But I'm not Paul I thought!

Paul described being so weak that he could do nothing other than rely on God's love for him as a child of his, and slowly I began to understand. When one is so completely dependent on God because there's absolutely NOTHING else one can do, then, paradoxically God gives you great strength; you almost become invincible!

Paul went on: 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' Logical I thought! Then I remembered this was the man who came to rejoice in his sufferings (Rom 5 v3ff) for not only was he united with Christ through them, but also because suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Wow!

There were times on this journey I wobbled in my belief in God's overarching care and love, when living was so difficult, so painful every day, I would gladly have given up if I could, but somehow one takes another breath, and another, and gradually the reality of being a child of God, by adoption and grace, sinks in afresh. Even in those grimmest periods of darkness when there seemed no hope, in those moments when I relied on him for every breath, my dependence was so complete, that those words of Paul to the Romans came alive and real. The Spirit did indeed help in my weakness (Rom 8, v 26) and reminded me again and again that nothing, nothing at all, can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus. No wonder we are indeed conquerors through him who loved us so much; without doubt, his grace is absolutely sufficient.

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