

5. Jesus' Victory Over Sickness

Mark 16:15-18; Acts 3:12-16

31st May 2020

Good morning. We're continuing our series exploring the benefits of Jesus' resurrection. Today's topic, Jesus' victory over *sickness*, is closely related to last week's topic on sin, as I will explain. It's also appropriate for Pentecost Sunday, since it is through the Holy Spirit that we can enjoy the benefits of his victory over sickness today. This a sensitive subject, so it's especially important to begin with prayer.

[Pray]

We read first from Mark 16:9-20. This may not be original to Mark's Gospel, but it is Holy-Spirit inspired Scripture, nonetheless. So, let's listen well as we read.

[Read Mark 16:9-20]

9When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. 11When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.

12Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country.

13These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.

14Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

15He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. 16Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. 17And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

19After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. 20Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.

At twenty-one, the young man was about to embark on a post-graduate course, when he received the devastating news: *brain cancer*. His mum had terminal brain cancer. He'd learned that God can heal any sickness, so he began to pray earnestly for her healing. But she got weaker, and a few weeks later, she died. What can we conclude from that? Is God really just a fantasy? Is he real, but *not* good and loving, as Christians claim? Is he good and loving, but too *weak* to overcome sickness, death or Satan? Did the gift of healing die out with the first apostles? Or was the young man's own faith insufficient for God to heal? And, if so, what does *that* say about God? Faith matures as we have to wrestle with questions like these, if we do so by delving deeper into *God's* word for understanding.

If you haven't guessed already, the young man was me. I still can't answer the question, "*Why* did my mum die when she did?" I *do* know that God has done great things for my faith through that experience. And I know that I still wish that she'd been with us longer and that Fiona and the children had had the chance to know her. Yet, I'm confident that God called her home to himself, and that, by doing so, he spared *her* much suffering in this life. And I knew then, as I know now, that it would be selfish to wish to deny her that joy.

But I began there because we need to ground any discussion about Jesus' victory over sickness in the reality that we still live under the "old order of things." The world currently operates under the universal judgement of God on human sin, which includes sickness and death. Becoming a Christian does not shield us from that reality. Prayer is not a magic wand by which we conjure up whatever we want. Nor can we create for ourselves an immunity from sickness by reciting a few healing Scriptures each day – no matter what degree of "faith" we might invest in that

exercise. The truth is that, until Jesus returns and recreates the world, Christians, like everyone else, will experience sickness and death.

But there is an equal danger in going the other way: in giving personal experience primacy over God's word in forming our beliefs. We just read reported from the lips of Jesus: "these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name ..." (among other things) "... they will place their hands on sick people, and *they will get well.*" It does not say, "those who personally witnessed my resurrection will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well; after them this gift will die out." In fact, in context "they" simply cannot mean only the apostles. Nor does the passage say, "the specially gifted or extra-faith-filled believers will place their hands on sick people and they will get well." It simply says, "they" – those who believe in Jesus' name.

And yes, this passage may well be a later addition; an attempt to "tidy up" a seemingly incomplete and inconclusive Gospel. But that doesn't mean it isn't true – or God-inspired. Every event described in this passage, save for the specific reference to "drinking poison," is matched in other New Testament accounts.¹ And the signs described in vv.17-18 and v.20 are seen throughout the history of the Church, beginning in various places in the book of Acts. For instance, in Acts 5, crowds are healed of sicknesses, some, it seems, simply by Peter's shadow falling on them. Acts 3 is also relevant – when a man born lame began to walk through Peter's command – because the Bible describes it as a "*healing.*" And Peter's explanation of that healing is particularly instructive with regards the *source* of this victory over sickness and suffering. Acts 3:12-16.

[Read Acts 3:12-16]

12When Peter saw this [a huge crowd running towards them in astonishment], he said to them: "Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? 13The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. 14You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. 15You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. 16By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

You see healing is firmly rooted in the person of Jesus Christ, and specifically in his death and resurrection. And that makes sense. Because sickness only exists at all as part of God's righteous judgement on human sin. But through his sacrificial death, Jesus Christ took all that judgement on himself and paid the price necessary to satisfy God's wrath at sin. And so, through his death and resurrection, the *consequences* of sin were overcome too, most notably sickness and death. Jesus' resurrection, in turn, inaugurated a new world order. He is the first-fruits of a resurrection to come for all his faithful people and for the whole world. The old world order is marred by sin, and therefore by sickness and death, but in the new world order there will be no sin, and therefore no sickness, suffering or death (Rev 21:4).

And that new world order began at Jesus' resurrection. But it will not be fully realised until he returns at the end of time. The Kingdom of God on earth is *now* (in part) but *not yet* fully here. And so, when we pray for healing, there are broadly four responses that God may give:

- 1) He may answer with instant, even miraculous, healing;
- 2) He may answer with more gradual healing, often incorporating the skills of medical personnel or counsellors in the process; with mental illness, I believe this slow healing may be particularly common, perhaps because it enables the learning of healthy lifestyle practices that can sustain the healing;

¹ Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene, in John 20:11-18; the two walking in the country, in Luke 24:13-35; Jesus' appearing to his disciples while they were eating, in Luke 24:36-49; Jesus' command to preach the gospel to all the world, in Matt 28:16-20; Jesus ascension into heaven in Luke 24:50-52 and Acts 1:9-11; and Jesus sitting at God's right hand, in Luke 22:69, Acts 7:55-56, Rom 8:34 and Col 3:1.

- 3) He may not heal in the way we ask at all, but will give us the strength and grace to cope with our condition day by day; or
- 4) He may heal through death and resurrection, which is the ultimate and most complete healing for those who love him.

Our primary responsibility is to seek to discern what God is doing in each individual circumstance, and to pray accordingly. For instance, God quickly turned *my* prayers for my mum into prayers for her faith to blossom, and for her to die in peace (both of which happened). At other times we should pray for healing here and now – I would view this as the default option. For instance, the pastor of the church in Russia with whom we fellowship was recently in hospital with Covid-19. We prayed, and he is now out of hospital and slowly improving. And we have seen a number of similar answers to prayer in the last few weeks. That's hard to understand for those who have lost loved ones, but God *has* the right to choose how healing comes.

I also can't *prove* that such healings wouldn't have happened without prayer. But I believe God's word when he says that those who believe in him will pray for the sick and they will get well. I believe it, because Jesus has won the victory over sickness through his death and resurrection, and because the Spirit of him who *raised* Jesus from the dead is living in each of us who believe in him (Rom 8:11).

In a sense, when Jesus' performs a healing, it brings into the old world order a glimpse of the new resurrected world order. Sometimes, God does this simply out of compassion for a need – often in biblical times that need was more than merely physical, but also economic and social as well. But primarily, God heals for two related reasons. The first is highlighted in Mark 16:20: "the Lord worked with them and *confirmed his word* by the signs that accompanied it." And the second is highlighted in Acts 3:13: "God ... has *glorified his servant Jesus*." Healings are primarily to confirm the gospel as true and to glorify Jesus. And surely God longs just as much as he ever did for those two things to happen. So why would he stop granting one of the gifts that supports them happening?

So, let's accept the mystery of apparently unanswered prayer, and let's press on to pray, in this crisis as always, in *faith* for those in need. Let's pray to God, who has won the victory over sickness through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. Let's pray that Jesus will be glorified through the healings God brings and that people will come to believe in his name, and have greater confidence in their faith, as they see him actively at work through us. I believe God has already been using us to stand in the gap in this way, and I believe he will continue to do so. For Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, *whoever* believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, *because I am going to the Father*" (John 14:12). Will you join me in praying that we would see more of God's victory over sickness among us for the sake of his gospel?