

Reflections for 26th September 2021

17th Sunday after Trinity

A sign of blessing and healing

The idea of anointing with oil – pouring aromatic oil on the head or body - may seem strange to us, but it was a familiar part of the culture of Biblical times, through both the Old and New Testament. To give just one example, from the perhaps familiar words of Psalm 23, ‘thou hast anointed my head with oil’. Anointing was seen as a sign of blessing, and was often used to accompany prayer – two kinds of prayer in particular.

Firstly, anointing was used as a sign to accompany the setting apart or ‘consecration’ that marked somebody out for a particular role or task, as a prophet, priest or king (just as our own monarch is still anointed as part of their coronation). In the New Testament the image of anointing is often used in relation to the gift and blessings of the Holy Spirit. And that image is even there in the title we are used to giving to Jesus, for the Hebrew word ‘Messiah’ was translated into Greek in the New Testament by the word ‘Christos’, which means ‘the anointed one’ – so Christ is the one that God has set apart and chosen.

Secondly, anointing with oil became closely associated with prayer for healing, as we can see in this week’s New Testament reading from the letter of James. The passage raises some deep questions about our understanding of prayer, and answers to prayer, which would take a long time to explore fully, but for now we can take from it the simple message that prayer for healing is a normal part of the life of the church. And it reminds us that the language and image of anointing, and the simple action of anointing with oil, can help us as we seek to pray for God’s blessing and healing for one another.

Revd John Waller

Almighty God,
whose Son revealed in signs and miracles
the wonder of your saving presence:
renew us and all your people
with your heavenly grace,
and in all our weakness
sustain us by your mighty power,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Bible readings: Numbers 11. 4-6, 10-16, 24-29; James 5. 13-20; Mark 9. 38-50

Story: ‘The Centurion’s Servant’ (a story of healing from Luke chapter 7)