



A Sermon for Healthcare Sunday 2008

Luke 8:40-56

The story is told of a man who went to see his GP because he was feeling really under the weather – sore throat, chest cough, running a temperature. You know how it is – he spent ages queuing to be seen by the surgery's resident diagnostic expert – the receptionist – and then he had to wait ages and ages, reading National Geographic Magazines from 1975 and copies of Family Circle that Morrisons had thrown out. When he got through the mags, he just stared into space. But minutes went into hours and still no sign of his turn. He went to the receptionist and complained bitterly. Why was it that he had to wait so long? He'd paid his NI all these years – and he rarely ever came to see the doctor. Surely he was entitled to better service than this! The receptionist looked officiously at him: "Waiting is part and parcel of the modern health service; you've got to expect it" she said. "But why?" said the man. She replied wryly "You're not called a Patient for nothing!"

We've all got our surgery or hospital waiting horror stories haven't we – those hours waiting for a doctor who then tells you there's nothing wrong with you. The dog eared magazines, the TV set to a programme no-one ever watches, those racks of NHS leaflets on subjects like "If you'd looked after yourself better you wouldn't be here now". In the Kings Lynn A&E they actually have screens advertising various products, including adverts for Solicitors just in case you want to get the full compensation out of the person that put you there or sue the doctor that will soon be treating you! But have a care for the Chinese: the communists still do waiting in style!

Why do I say all this? One of the trends that has happened over the last few years is that people have become more savvy and cynical about health and healthcare. Many years ago doctors were held in a higher regard than these days. Few years ago would question a health practitioner's judgement – what the doctor said was how it was and the treatment offered was what was necessary. They trusted the doctor. People are also now more questioning of the health service – can we really trust that if we go into hospital that we don't come out with something worse! We live in a world which has got cynical about most things and health care is one of the popular ones.

But let's be fair, when it comes to the crunch, we've all also known times when we or our family have received great treatment from caring, hard-working staff at surgeries and hospitals, who we have been thankful to and who do a great job. And we've got to be grateful to that doctor we came across who got a difficult diagnosis spot-on; for that cancer ward who responded quickly and saved our life or someone in our family, for the paramedics that got us to hospital so quickly, for that amazing piece of surgery that was impossible a few years ago, for that new drug which has helped us so much. Yes there are horror stories and don't we love to tell them, but so often we forget the stories of hope, of heroes, of caring, of skill and of dedication which are more the norm in the modern health service, than what the cynics tell us.

It's a question of faith. How far are we prepared to go to trust those who would help us in matters of health? For most of us, we put our trust in medical staff but it's surprising how many people these days seek some kind of alternative therapy. Who do we trust and how far are we prepared to go with them?

Why a lack of faith? Because people are fallible, we don't have infinite wisdom and make mistakes. Look back before the advent of the NHS and into the history of healthcare and you'll see that most modern Western healthcare has its origins in the church. Christians invented hospitals. All societies had their physicians but it was from Christian foundations that modern science-based healthcare developed.

Interestingly, Christians have always been at the forefront of compassion in healthcare. It was Christian mission that established hospitals and primary healthcare in many parts of the world. And up until the secularisation of healthcare in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, faith was seen as an important part of healthcare. Now the religious influence is often reduced to hospital chaplains and personal visits. Take faith away and hope can leave with it. And so often Christian healing ministry is something outside of conventional health services rather than being part of it. And like the health service, there is good Christian healing ministry – and some petty suspect stuff out there and in my years in ministry, I've seen both and the effect it has on the lives of people.

What's interesting is that there have now been several studies worldwide on how people's faith affects the outcome of medical treatment. Surprise, surprise ... invariably a person with strong religious faith has a higher chance of a good outcome than someone who doesn't.

And of course here at Maidstone Road we're exploring how we can put the Christian faith back into people's care in a way that deals with both their physical and spiritual needs, because you can't separate them.

And as we look in this morning's passage we see people who were approaching Jesus, not because their faith was strong, but their faith was weak for whatever reason and for each the outlook was bleak. And we see in each case how the presence of Jesus was transforming. Interestingly both of these stories are recalled by a physician – Dr Luke.

The first story was of a lady who had suffered a haemorrhage for 12 years – and had received no healing (which is no surprise as they just don't have the knowledge or technology in those days to do much about it). So, it was a serious problem, not just from a medical point of view, but from a religious one – bleeding meant that she was ceremonially unclean – so she was not just ill, but also an outcast in her community – people didn't touch her and she wasn't fit to go into the synagogue – and certainly not meet a famous rabbi like Jesus. Although she believed that Jesus could maybe help, her faith was weak as she was not bold enough to walk up to Jesus and ask for help knowing what people thought of her. And would that be worth it if He turned out to be like all the other physicians she had wasted her money on over the last twelve years.

But she wanted to be healed and came up with a cunning plan. She took a chance and probably highly disguised, touched the hem of Jesus cloak because she figured that touching it might get her healed. It was an off chance – a piece of desperation – but what could she do under the circumstances? She wasn't bold enough to do anything else. Hey! It worked. She was healed!

I'd love it that people asked for prayer at the start of their illness so that they have the opportunity to make Jesus part of their treatment process. Unfortunately, He's so often that desperation measure isn't He? Why? Is it because we don't think that prayer works? Or that in becoming ill God has somehow let us down? Or perhaps if we are ill that we have somehow let God down and don't deserve to be well? Or perhaps we are just angry at God because we are ill? Or simply embarrassed by our illness? Or don't want people to feel sorry for us in this state?

Actually, I completely speculated about why the woman didn't ask Jesus face to face. We are not told what was going through her mind. I was speculating from what Dr Luke has written in his notes. All I know is that her faith in his wasn't strong enough to go face to face with Him and other people. It could have been any one of the reasons – but she wanted to be healed.

She was healed! She must have been pretty pleased, then horrors! Jesus stopped. He had sussed her. He made a right fuss. The disciples were mystified. Loads of people were touching Jesus – why fuss about someone in particular. Trembling she owns up thinking Jesus would be angry about her being sneaky. Whatever happens her fear dissolved when he shows her acceptance. Jesus wants us to speak to Him. Bring our hopes and fears to Him because He loves us.

I find the phrase he uses to describe her interesting: *47 The woman saw that she had been found out, so she came trembling and threw herself at Jesus' feet. There in front of everybody, she told him why she had touched him and how she had been healed at once. 48 Jesus said to her, "My daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace."* Your faith has made you well. What faith? She had just enough to touch the hem of His garment. She reached her hand out and He responded despite her weak faith. Reaching her hand out was a cry of desperate help but He commends that! And she went in peace, knowing she was accepted, knowing she was loved by God.

Is your faith weak this morning? Are you almost too embarrassed to pray, let alone ask someone else to pray with you? Don't worry – Jesus will be thrilled just to hear your voice and will come close to you – close in maybe unexpected ways. But you have to reach out to Him and as you do so, whatever the background, whatever your feelings – His hand is right there to take yours.

Let me briefly look at the other story. Jesus had been asked to go and see the daughter of Jairus who was seriously ill. You could imagine Jairus being agitated as Jesus had stopped to deal with the woman. And you could imagine his disappointment and grief as he heard that they were too late, the girl was dead. But Jesus isn't phased. *50 But Jesus heard it and said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid; only believe, and she will be well."* These were words to encourage Jairus. Were they? Let's move on.

There are all the family and mourners at the house in Middle Eastern fashion wailing. It was something so deeply sorrowful about - family had just lost a child, it was a deeply grief-stricken time. If you have lost a child, I'm sure it is something you could empathise with. You could imagine how unhelpful Jesus' words and actions then were! He threw everyone except the parents and three disciples out of the house to take a look and Luke says "52 Everyone there was crying and mourning for the child. Jesus said, "Don't cry; the child is not dead — she is only sleeping!" And the people, including I presume Jairus just laughed. It wasn't a funny ha ha sort of laugh, it was that bitter ironic laugh that people give when someone has said something incredibly stupid and awfully insensitive. What a stupid thing to say. She was brown bread – dead.

Their laugh shows two things – first of all that they resented Him being there and saying what he said and secondly, that their faith was weak – they had little expectation that He could do anything, despite his formidable reputation as a healer, the fact He's just healed someone of an untreatable disease and His words *"Don't be afraid; only believe, and she will be well."* That was their faith – weak and sceptical – and even insulted by the notion that Jesus can do anything.

When we talk about prayer and how that can help in times of illness often leads to scepticism, resistance, and even downright rejection from some people – often even Christians. The whole notion that Jesus who miraculously healed in those days can have any intervention in the modern world seems ridiculous. The idea that in conventional medicine that the presence of God may help medical staff and have a positive effect on someone's treatment seems laughable. How dare we give people false hopes and false information!

Except it isn't false hopes and false information. People are healed when they are prayed for – often miraculously. Just because we haven't met anyone personally doesn't mean that it hasn't happened. And then of course, there's the scientific studies that show that faith makes a difference – we can't deny them. And what about the testimony of Christian medical staff who can testify to the presence of God in their lives at work. We've got some of them here! And then there are those who have been blessed by Christians who have cared and prayed for them – who have known the presence and peace of God in difficult health situations – we have them here too.

So what have we found out from Dr Luke's casebook this morning. First of all, that Jesus is ready and waiting to hear from you this morning. For whatever reason, you've been slow in coming to Him and asking for help. But He never casts off any who come to Him for help. He's loving, He's caring. Speak to Him this morning. If you find that difficult, then allow someone to pray with you.

Secondly, have expectation – Jesus makes a difference. He made a difference then – He makes a difference now. It may be a spectacular miracle, it may be that you just know His presence as you receive treatment, it may be that He needs to heal other things in your life which you know need dealing with, or perhaps you need to know His strength just to live. In both situations this morning, the faith of people may have been weak but Jesus transformed everything! Perhaps we just need to surrender to Him and let Him transform us. Or maybe you've never accepted Jesus into your life and you need to know His transforming presence. Let me underline what I said – speak to someone, allow them to speak and pray with you and allow Jesus to make that change in you.

Let's pray

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