

Healing was central to the ministry of Jesus. The Gospels are full of instances in which he is seen to cure those who are sick and to restore them to a full and healthy life.

This ministry was one in which Jesus also expected his followers to share. So in the stories of his life we hear that he sends out the disciples to “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons” (Matthew 10:8). Or as Luke puts it “Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:8-9). Mark assures us that this was a ministry in which they had some success: “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them” (Mark 6:13). The main biblical reference to such activity on the part of Jesus’ followers comes from the Letter of James:

“Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. (James 5: 14-15)

### **What do the gospel stories teach us about healing?**

Sometimes we might come to receive the Sacrament of Healing with the expectation of a quick cure of whatever it is that physically challenges us. But we need to frame our expectations of the healing ministry of the church in the context of the life and witness of Jesus as whole, as it is narrated in the gospels.

The cures of the Gospel stories are not simply ‘miracles’ as we might define the term. Often we read them as simply centering on the ‘cure’ of an individual. But in their own context they embody signs of the presence of the Kingdom of

God in the ministry of Jesus Christ. In Jesus' own life that meant not only healing others but also enduring suffering and embracing death himself. As we share in the ministry of healing in these parishes we keep these two aspects of Jesus' life, his healing of others and his own embrace of physical weakness and death, very much together. Keeping Jesus' own practice of healing and his embrace of our own physical weakness together helps give context to our own expectations of what God desires for us. It reminds us that:

- no matter what course our own illness may take (whether our condition improves, remains stable or advances), that God in Christ shares in our suffering as a support and comfort.
- the church's ministry of healing is centered on nurturing and restoring our relationship with God, and that our healing can be as much 'spiritual' as anything else.
- often we might not be able to see in a time of acute illness that God is with us as a healing presence, but are only able to discern and recognise this in retrospect.
- in the life of Christ the full presence of God was, and is still, experienced.

Nor are gospel stories of healing simply about physical restoration. Rather they are intimately related to the restitution of the social value of the individuals affected (Mark 1:44; 5:15-20; 6:32-34, Luke 13:10-17). In healing Jesus restores the human dignity of the person and brings those who are sick back into the community. At the same time he also challenges the norms of their communities and in so doing highlights how groups of people and whole societies may also be ill and in need of restoration.

**What are we praying for when we ask God for healing?**

So as we come to pray for healing we pray that, whatever the process of our own diseases, we may experience the transforming power and presence of Christ with us. We also pray that our society, and our churches, would be healed from the dis-ease of seeing those of us with physical illnesses, problems and challenges as somehow imperfect and inferior. God in Jesus Christ reminds us that even when we are sick we are of infinite value as people made in the image of God.

The laying on of hands and the anointing, which the letter of James outlines, enable the recovery of our innate dignity in Christ. In the touch of human hands Christ himself touches us through the ministry of the wider community of the Church. In that touch we are reminded of God's loving presence and solidarity with us, as well as our solidarity with and presence for one another. In the smearing of oil God seals us with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit seals us with love; renews our confidence and faith in God; and strengthens us against discouragement and despair. We receive the anointing on our forehead and hands as a sign that we offer all of who we are at this moment to God. So let us pray that we may be:

- United to Christ's own suffering and death
- Strengthened to face with courage the sufferings of illness
- Receive Christ's forgiveness of the dis-ease of our human frailty
- Restored to health, in whatever way God desires for us
- Prepared for our own death and for the fullness of Christ's risen life

### **The Practice of Sacrament of Healing in the parishes**

On some Sundays of the month (generally the fourth) the Sacrament of Healing will be available during communion. After receiving communion, if we wish to receive this ministry,

we are invited to move to the font in each church. There will be usually two people there, a lay person and a priest, as we will normally receive the sacrament of healing in two parts:

### **The laying on of hands with prayer**

This can be from a lay or ordained person. Generally we hope to have lay people share in this ministry in the parish. It is a very simple, straightforward and moving act. It's good to say your name. You may also, if you wish, like to say a few words about what it is that you have come to pray for. Or it may be that you have come to pray for another person, in which case you can give their name. Then, laying hands on your head, the person will pray very simply using your name "**Mary, may Christ deliver you from every evil and grant you peace.**"

### **The anointing with oil**

This part of the ministry of healing is usually only performed by a priest. So after the laying of hands you are invited to move to the priest with the oil. We hold out our hands as a sign that we offer the fullness of ourselves to God. The priest will then make the sign of the cross on our foreheads and then on our palms whilst saying: "**John, I anoint you in the name of God who gives you life. Receive Christ's forgiveness, healing and love.**"

### **Lighting a candle in prayer**

Although not formally a part of the Sacrament of Healing many people find it helpful and meaningful to light a candle after receiving this ministry. It is a sign of our prayer for ourselves and others, and of our thankfulness for the grace of the Holy Spirit in our lives, of which the laying on of hands and anointing is a sign.