

## **Sunday 18 October: Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity**

**“Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear!””**

**Readings: Isaiah 35.3-6; Luke 10.1-9**

In the name of God, Source of all Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit. Amen

When I think about healing I don't usually think first about Church! I tend to think about doctors and medicine and hospitals. I think about how much I hate pain and how glad I always am to get some help and how much I value our National Health Service. I think about the health sciences – medicine, surgery, psychiatry, psychology – and that leads me to think about how many people are involved in the caring business, dedicatedly, day in day out, and how much we need to pray for them and express our gratitude for them on this St Luke's day.

I think about what it might be like not to have such a system – to live a life overwhelmed by poverty and disease, to be in pain and see my family die, my animals die, my history die, as so do so may in our world and how therefore part of health for us must be about learning not only how to maintain our own Health Service in the face of such vast and expensive demands upon it but also how to share our resources so that all may live well.

I think about what is happening to our planet and how much in need of healing it is. The re-greening of our earth is surely part of our future hope of health.

When I think of healing I also think of the life of the imagination, of learning, of wonder, of education and artistic endeavour – of how being fully well means being able to join in the imaginative processes of my fellow human beings. In this sense being well also involves being able to work, not necessarily for money but to create a better world, to be involved in no matter how small a way in the recreation of our world. That may be for some of us in unemployment or retirement – what do **we** add to the lives of those around us by what we have to offer?

When I think of healing I think too of friendship – of family and friends, of colleagues and people we have not yet met. Part of feeling well is connecting our minds our hearts, setting our views our endeavours in dialogue and trust with others. Even if we are solitary there will be the connection of books and music, thought and the intermittent expression of those thoughts with those who matter to us.

So being well, being healed, knowing myself fully alive involves for me all those areas of life – health care, justice seeking, caring for the environment, being valued and loved in relationship, nurturing the life of my imagination in the beauty of the earth, in the variety of the arts and in how we make our own contribution to the world.

If that's all about our life out there, beyond the doors of St Martin's, what are we doing at a healing service? Why am I here?

First of course there is left my need to express gratitude for the interpenetration of all these aspects of my life, for all that is involved in my being fully alive. Secondly I am seeking a place where by pooling our resources we can share the immensity of what we have with others and to create prophetic challenge where that sharing looks likely to disappear or to be diminished.

But it's more than that – to choose to be involved in a service of healing is to choose to open ourselves to a deeper listening and seeing.

In both the reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah and the reading from the Gospel of Luke healing is a sign of the in breaking of God's kingdom into history. For the prophet Isaiah God will bless his people and return them from exile to Zion. All may be loss and the destruction of their identity in exile, but keep faithful and their vision and hope will be rewarded in healing and peace.

For Jesus at this point in his ministry in Luke time is galloping now. He is on his journey towards Jerusalem and his light footed emissaries on their universal mission are to bring peace and healing in preparation for the welcome of God's kingdom in Jesus.

Only there are some pretty big differences between these visions if we examine the texts more closely. In the text of Isaiah this passage comes after the neighbouring people of Edom have been judged by God and destroyed as enemies. This is at least in part a nationalistic vision – God acts arbitrarily to preserve and heal Israel but to destroy her enemies. Israel is permitted to break connection with the suffering of others, to understand herself as healed in the sense of triumphing over other people while they lie smashed in the ditch.

This vision changes radically with Jesus. In Jesus suffering is neither a punishment nor something isolating us from others or from God. It is instead a connection between us all who suffer as a result of being human and a connection between us and God who is alive in Jesus of Nazareth. The emissaries are sent out in a number 70 symbolic of the whole known gentile world, and Jesus himself is on his way to his death. Suffering and death are not swept away here, nor understood as punishment, but are used for the transformation of the whole world into peace. Jesus is working in the context of his impending death and that death will become a sign of God's healing. This is a suffering servant present with his friends, not to see Israel's vanquishing of others, but to take upon himself the suffering of others and transform it – how?

As I become more experienced as a pastor I become more and more keen to understand this question of how – how is suffering redeemed and transformed, by Jesus and by us who are his body? I am keen to understand because as I get older I see how constrained we are by the circumstances in which we find ourselves. I cannot magic away those circumstances by which many of my older friends here now live alone in the relative loneliness of the West End whereas they once lived fuller richer lives with their families or best beloved or both! They would prefer not to be alone! I cannot take from some of you the very serious illnesses which have attacked your bodies and minds. I cannot wave a wand to give all children who deserve them good school places or take away the sometimes loneliness of the single. I cannot take away the restrictions involved for myself in being involved in Christian leadership and being gay. We live with limitation and constraint, for some those are harsh limitations and painful constraints indeed.

Then when I look wider it would be easy to fall into pessimism about what the future holds. The huge question of the sustainability of the resources upon which we have come to depend; of the proliferation of nuclear arms at a time of increased religious and racial tension; of climate change; of a world population estimated to rise to 9 billion by 2050 – such issues are daunting – who am I, and how can I engage in a meaningful healed life against their backdrop?

Those who come to the 6.30 service here will know by now that this summer I became captivated by the life and theology of Etty Hillesum whose diary I commend to you - it is called "An interrupted life" and the commentary about it called "A life transformed", by Patrick Woodhouse.

I became captivated because Etty answers this question what on earth are we doing here and how may we expect God to touch us and heal us in the context of overwhelming threats to our peace and wellbeing. She answers the question of constraint – what difference does God make to us when our lives are constrained by that which we would not choose but cannot change. What is God's healing then? What are we praying for if not a magician's wand to take away our pain, break up the constraints throttling us?

An interrupted life, though one of the most beautiful books I have ever read is not for the squeamish, since it is the diary of a young Dutch woman, a Jewess, caught up to the point of death in the holocaust created by National Socialism in the period of the Second World War. Etty might be called a thoroughly modern young woman at the start of the book, she is artistic, promiscuous, self-obsessed and a follower of all the major world religions in a general way. Yet at one point in her twenties she becomes completely taken over by the God found at the heart of Christianity, the God of Jesus Christ, the God who is found in my neighbour and demanded to be loved by her there in her neighbour no matter who that neighbour might be – old man, or small child or Concentration Camp thug. Etty's characteristic gesture as she learns to love this God is to throw herself onto her knees – first on to the brown coconut matting of her small bathroom while she is still a free woman, then beside her bed, then the boxes in her concentration camp home, then the corner of the wire fence of the camp looking out to the sun and the hills. She cannot help herself. She is compelled to do so. And instead of allowing herself to be caught up utterly in anxiety or bitterness over the barbaric destruction of her own people in Holland, in Amsterdam, in her own street, her own family, her own body, as the noose of cruelty tightens she uses the situation to learn to love and to pray – she decides to make the space around her a place where God is served by her and seen by others. She decides to bear witness to the truth and the love of God where God is apparently not. And in integrating the negative side of her life which she is powerless to change into herself she is able to rejoice and love and forgive so that she is called in the camp "radiant."

We are not all called to be Etty but we are called to be transformed by the love of God seen in Jesus of Nazareth and this is what this service of healing is all about. Whether we sit quietly praying or come forward for anointing what we are asking is that the situation we are in with all its constraints and pain, with all its powers to destroy us and those whom we love, with all its possibilities for despair and hopelessness, will become a situation where God is known and served. We ask for God's healing touch to transform us into being capable of love beyond our pain.

This week at the education evening Inspiring Relationships a member of this church, just as I was leaving asked an anguished question straight from the pages of the gospel. And it is a question for all of us as we rebuild community here. He asked ""How we can reach out in love to those who feel the church has turned against them?"

When the monk Thomas Merton was asked by someone keen on evangelism a similar question he answered – perhaps now it is not so much the time to talk about Christ as to let him live in us, and to let others know about him by the way they see him living in us. Etty Hillesum, has she been allowed to live, would have rejoiced in such an answer. And so may we!

As we rebuild healing community here, and kneel to pray for healing today, we can pray that God will transform us in all the pain, constraint and limitation that we know, so that others may come to see Christ in us, and we ourselves live more and more the very being of God, the very being of love, be the body of Christ, wounded yet fully alive. Amen.