

## HEALTHY FAITH

Trinity XIV

Sung Eucharist,

St. Michael, Cornhill

Sunday, September 6<sup>th</sup> 2015

© The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

Over the years, in so many ways, life has been kind to us as a family, not least in where we lived: Oxford, Lincoln, Portsmouth, Lambeth Palace in London and then Norwich. Each was an exciting or beautiful place. When we moved to Wakefield in West Yorkshire, however, it was a different story.

Wakefield, which had been the county town of the West Riding, had retained much of its historic heart. But overall it looked and felt tired. The former Paton and Baldwin wool mill was now an office block. The coal mines had all closed. The city itself was lacklustre.

In the ten years we were there, however, and despite the most serious downturn since the 1929 stock market crash, there was a remarkable transformation: an excellent new shopping centre growing out of the town centre itself. ‘d ‘ave thought we’d ‘ave a Debenhams here? I heard two or three days after the new centre opened. Then there’s the Hepworth Gallery, two new railway stations and so on. But perhaps most crucial of all was the rebuilding of Pinderfields Hospital.

The old building was a dire series of twenty eight Nissen huts branching off a central corridor. *Now* there is an excellent well-appointed infirmary. What astonished me most about the new building was that not only was there a *chapel*, but it is set right at the heart of the new hospital. I couldn’t even tell you where the old chapel was! This says something quite powerful about the relationship between health and faith.

Today’s readings put health, wholeness and healing firmly on the agenda. There is that vision from Isaiah ‘When the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf are unstopped, the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.’ It is a picture of a world transformed. The gospel reading strikes a similar note, with the healing of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter and the bringing to full health of the deaf man with a speech impediment.

Yet for all this, healing miracles and this aspect of our faith, all too easily, becomes either an embarrassment or a fantasy. What do I mean? Well, often people faced with terminal or devastating chronic illness in their loved ones, fight shy of connecting it with their faith. They accept a *literally* ‘fatalistic’ attitude. What will be, will be, what has faith to offer? On the opposite extreme, in some parts of the Christian Church, healing by faith seems blind to the facts. A generation ago, the remarkable evangelist, David Watson, was stricken by cancer. Vast efforts of prayer failed to save this impressive young man from a premature death. So for some, a determined faith that prayer would cure let them down. Yet miracles do happen. Cancers wither, bodily collapse is reversed in the face of often apparently terminal illnesses

So where is God in all this and what does Jesus say to us in the gospel today, and why was it significant that that new chapel at Pinderfields Hospital was right at the heart of things? With the Syrophenician woman, Jesus is direct but in an ironic sort of way. He tests the woman’s faith. Seeing her response he’s equally direct: ‘You may go, the demon has left your daughter.’ With the deaf man, Jesus is more coy. He takes him aside privately and then uses very earthy actions – spitting, touching the man’s tongue, putting his fingers into his ears and proclaiming imply: ‘Be opened.’

But in each encounter, the upshot of all this is that faith and daily life remain very clearly part of one rich woven tapestry.

Sixteen or so years ago now, Cardinal Basil Hume announced that he'd been diagnosed with an inoperable cancer. As with David Watson, some years earlier, each had accepted the critical return of their illnesses and they had offered themselves into the hands of God. We've heard similar reflections from US President Jimmy Carter, in this past week. All is offered up to God and God's will. Robert Runcie attended Basil Hume's funeral, and he was also to die just a few weeks later. Just before Hume's requiem a friend hugged Runcie, and said to him 'How are *you*?' 'Dying cheerfully', he said – and he meant it.

I've dwelt on very well-known examples of human suffering, all none of whose illnesses were halted by prayer. Yet the prayer in every case was still transforming – those who were ill, those close to them and the world looking on saw illness and health in a new way. Sometimes, of course, following the prayers there is recovery. Their courage and their faith were palpable. So what does this say? Well, key to all this is that God is at the heart, God, as Jesus showed in those stories, will never let us go, even in terminal illness, even in the face of death.

For those with faith, healing and wholeness include both all that our remarkable medics can now do, and they include too God's everlasting hands that undergird all. It's an intricate interweaving of both science and faith. Health and healing are about wholeness in its richest sense – body, mind, soul and spirit. Healing is not simply about repairing a stricken piece of machinery.

In our epistle reading, James tells us that faith without works is as nothing. So prayer, faith, and the skill of the medics, the miracles of modern treatment are all one. A *healthy faith* offers all of this into the hands of God, for God will never let us go.

Amen

### Readings

Isaiah. 35. 4-7a.

James. 2. 14- 17.

Mark. 7. 24-37.