

## **Sermon given by Revd. Marion Chatterley on 9th October 2016**

Listen again to what Jesus said to the one leper who came back to say thank you – your faith has made you well. We'd already been told that all ten of them had been healed, but this one leper was told in addition that he had been made well. So I want to think a bit about what the difference might be between healing and wellness.

It seems to me that our ideas of what constitutes health have changed over the years. It's not so long ago that we defined health in a very straightforward way, it was an absence of illness. 'Are you well' meant essentially 'is there anything physically wrong with you'. I wonder whether that definition came, to some extent, from a time when there were many illnesses that couldn't be cured and perhaps couldn't even be treated. So a lack of physical health was quite a serious thing. And it's a definition that really only focusses on visible or identifiable health problems; it's a definition that is about disease. And, by and large, it's about diseases that we're not embarrassed to talk about. So someone might be happy to tell you that they had a sore hip and less happy to discuss other ailments.

The medical profession did its best to heal – and when it couldn't manage that the message was usually an apology that there was nothing else they could do. So this was a binary understanding. Healing at one end of a continuum and not healing at the other and very little discussion of what might be in the middle.

And then we began to realize that we could to some extent influence our health outcomes. We learned the connection between smoking and cancer and we were able to make choices for ourselves. As we became more conscious of the connection between our health and the way we look after ourselves, health began to mean something about healthy living. To be healthy began to mean to be active. To be health conscious. We began to admire healthy looking bodies, to aspire to toned muscles and strong abs. We were given lots of dietary advice – much of which was contradictory – but there was a clear sense that we could make our bodies into temples that would then epitomize health and wellbeing.

The next real change in thinking probably came with the advent of palliative care and an understanding that it was possible to make a real difference for people despite the fact that cure wasn't an option. We began to talk about quality of life; people began to make choices for themselves about how they lived rather than how long they lived – they sometimes decided to refuse invasive treatment and to make the very best of whatever time they had left. We began to understand that healing might not be about cure, but might be about something deeper, something more important.

The World Health Organisation defines health as complete physical, psychological and social well being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. That definition was agreed in 1948 and hasn't been changed. I think though that it is becoming better understood and integrated. The overreaching goal of medicine these days is to ensure that people have the best possible quality of life regardless of their physical or mental limitations or of their prognosis.

Perhaps the best contemporary example of that is the Paralympics where we see people whose bodies aren't perfect, people who may have chronic health problems, who are able to achieve in an arena that evidences physical strength and ability and a commitment to one's own well-being.

So, let's go back to our ten lepers. There was a miracle – one of many examples in our Gospels – and Jesus healed each and every one of them. They were all physically healed and nine of them went on their way. The tenth came back and engaged with Jesus and as a result he was told that he had become well. If we return to the WHO definition, he became physically and psychologically well. What the WHO does not refer to, of course, is his spiritual health. And that's crucial. The tenth leper turned back and connected with Jesus. He took care of his own spiritual being – he gave praise to God, he gave thanks to his healer and, as a result, he was transformed. His state of health was complete – physical, psychological and spiritual.

So let's think about what this means for us. Some of us have physical ailments; some of us will face psychological challenges; some of us will be alongside loved ones whose physical or mental health is not good. Some of us work within the medical profession and seek to help other people who are hoping for healing. And sometimes we can help and we can heal. A broken leg can be set and supported and it will heal. An invasive illness might take some time but may well be completely eradicated. And there may be some things that become chronic or acute and which will not go away and which will shorten our lives. And that is all about physical or psychological health. It challenges us and the people around us. It impacts on our lives. And sometimes we will be cured, and sometimes we won't. We can take care of our bodies but we can't always control what happens to them.

Our spiritual health is also a variable in our lives. All of us will encounter times when our spiritual health is not as good as we would like. There are times when we feel more distant from God. Times when we find it hard to believe that God is still alongside us and supporting us. Times when our prayer lives are not quite as fulfilling or even evident as we would like.

And those are the times when we can go to Jesus for healing and we can be reassured that healing will be on offer. If we turn to God, if we open our hearts to Jesus, if we seek to actively encounter him in a place of prayer – there will be a response. It might not be a loud clanging of cymbals; it might not be a sign in the clouds but if we take the time to praise God and to seek to find Jesus in our lives, something will happen.

There may not always be a cure for our physical selves but there is always healing available for our spiritual selves. God's arms are always open and the welcome always awaits. Your faith can make you well.

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