

Healing and wholeness

‘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.’ On several occasions in my ministry I have followed that verse from our reading and done exactly what is prescribed – usually for people with serious, terminal conditions. In fact I recently did it with our dear brother Elke, husband of Peggy, who so sadly died last week. I have to say that in no case when I have done this praying and anointing has the person been healed – if you mean by healing that the disease has them and they recovered. In every case they have died from their illness. But that raises a question as to what we mean by healing, and that is an issue that I will return to.

What I would like to do first, however, is to explore briefly something that arises from this passage in James, and that is what it means to be whole. Before we can consider what healing might mean, is it not helpful first to consider what it might mean to be well? There is that wonderful Hebrew word ‘shalom’ which we translate ‘peace’ and which is in a sense the goal of human life. ‘Shalom’ means wholeness or wellbeing, and I would suggest that this passage from James gives us some clues as to what shalom means. So let’s consider it a bit more closely.

One of the first things that strikes us is that there is an emphasis in the passage on confession and forgiveness and reconciliation. So we’re told in verse 16 to ‘confess your sins to one another’ and verse 15 tells us that ‘the prayer of faith will save the sick... and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.’ So why this emphasis? Does this imply that people are sick because they have sinned, done something wrong? It’s amazing how many people think that. How often have I heard someone in hospital or suffering from an illness or an accident or a tragedy say to me, ‘so what have I done to deserve this?’ Well, no, the idea that there is some simple correspondence between sin and sickness is not at all Christian. But nevertheless this stress on confession and forgiveness reminds us that in order to be a whole person, in order to be in a state of shalom, we need to be at peace with God. Or to put it another way, we can be healed of an illness or a condition and can walk out of hospital treated and ‘better’ - but if we are not at peace with God then we are not fully whole. Sin disrupts our relationship with God. It creates a blockage between us and the

source of life and therefore it deprives us of wellbeing. And in confession that breach is mended. There is reconciliation with God and that relationship is restored. So healing involves confession and hence the peace that comes to those whose sickness is not healed but who die at peace with God.

There are, however, other areas in our lives where we are not at peace, apart from our relationship with God. James tells us to confess our sins to one another – not just to God - and that reminds us of the horizontal dimension of sin, that we sin not only against God but against one another. And therefore to be whole and in a state of shalom mean also being at peace with other people, seeking reconciliation with those we may have wronged or who may have wronged us. There's a verse in the Letter to the Romans that says, 'If possible, so far as it lies with you, live at peace with all' and sometimes people don't want to be at peace with us and we can't do any more about it – but insofar as it lies with you, be at peace with all and that too is a key to wholeness. And to be surrounded by our brothers and sisters in Christ when we're sick and to be anointed with oil and to confess our sins – this is a reminder that we are made for relationships with others and in them lies our shalom.

But of course this emphasis on confession and forgiveness reveals another dimension of shalom, and that concerns our relationship with ourselves. I cannot be in a state of shalom if I am not at peace with myself. And if we are honest that person who stares back at us from the mirror is not someone who we are fully at peace with. We are not the people we would like to be and deep within us there is shame and regret. And to confess and to know that we are loved and forgiven and to be reassured that God's grace far exceeds the scope of our guilt and to know that in God's eyes the past is a forgotten country - this is to restore us to ourselves and to wholeness, to shalom.

So, peace with God, peace with others, peace with ourselves – this is what it means to be saved, to be fully human and alive. There is, however, another dimension to our lives – one that is important to note on this Harvest Thanksgiving – and that is our relationship with nature, creation, the environment. And this is especially important, living as we are in this ecological crisis of global warming and rising sea levels and the elimination of species. And I find it fascinating that James here, in his instructions on prayer and healing, cites the example of Elijah. We read the story in 1st Kings, of how Elijah pronounces God's judgement on Israel. Israel here is being ruled by a wicked king and queen who have led Israel astray and now judgement comes,

but note how it comes! There is a drought, and as a result there is no harvest. And this is a theme that we find repeatedly in the Bible – that estrangement from God inevitably destroys our relationship with nature. We are bound up in this web, this matrix of interconnection with God and with others and with ourselves and with creation. And today on this Harvest Thanksgiving we are reminded that while God gives with open hands human beings grab and hoard, and while God tunes and balances nature humans destroy and leave our destructive footprints on God’s delicate handiwork - and car companies cheat on their exhaust emissions, always in pursuit of more profit, more profit, more profit.

And I love the figure of Elijah here. He is God’s prophet. And he comes to bring healing and to restore shalom to this poor woman and her son – providing meal and oil for them so that they might eat and be saved from death and live. But what intrigues me is the way Elijah is in tune with nature – he is fed first by the ravens, and then he commands the rains and the earth yields its harvest! He is the dispenser of shalom, and as God’s prophet he is in relationship with God, but we see him here too in relationship with creation, with nature, with the birds. And if I may return for a moment to Elke who died last week – and I have Peggy’s permission to share this – on that evening when we prayed for him and anointed him with oil he spoke of his great love and passion for birds and the sheer delight he found in them. And that was something that cancer and pain could not take from him and it was a little area of shalom even in the midst of suffering – and certainly not the only one.

Relationships with God, with others, with ourselves, with nature of which we are a part: to be in a state of shalom, wellbeing is to be rightly related in each of these areas. And true healing will involve some restoration of those relationships. And true healing will involve some restoration of those relationships. And perhaps these readings today are an invitation to consider our lives in each of these areas and to consider where we need to seek deeper shalom.

One last thought about shalom and healing, and here I want to use a musical analogy. When as human beings we are whole, when we are in state of shalom and wellbeing, we could be said to be like an instrument that is well tuned and that produces a harmonious sound. And here I take as an illustration a guitar. When the guitar is well-tuned it emits a harmonious sound and that is the sound of shalom, of a life at peace. But then something goes wrong.

Something bad happens in our lives – an illness or a loss - and suddenly we are no longer in tune. It's like a string going out of tune and shalom is gone and our lives are discordant, dissonant. So how do we restore harmony? How do we restore shalom? Well, one way would be to re-tune the string – to put it right, in other words to put right whatever is wrong: to heal the disease, to restore what is lost. That's one way and God sometimes does that. But there's another way. As well as re-tuning the string on the guitar you can also re-tune the other strings to the string that is out of tune. You can re-tune the guitar around the out-of-tune string. And the guitar will sound different but it will be harmonious once again. And that is an illustration of another kind of healing. Often God does not re-tune the string. God does not put right what is wrong. But rather God retunes our lives around what has happened to us so that we are at peace. And how often do we witness this? - people in whose lives things have gone badly wrong. And God has not simply put those things right, restored them. But somehow their lives have been retuned around those things – and truly they bear witness to the shalom of God that passes all understanding. And to God be the glory. Amen.