

Sermon: Healing the sick in the power of the Spirit

Mark 1:29-39

Rev Dr Jos M Strengholt

Jesus healed all sorts of diseases and he drove evil spirits out of people, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Should we, today, be doing the same? Among Christians there are so many opinions about this issue, and speaking about it now is like walking through a minefield. Whatever I say, I may get shot at from either left or right, and any statement can blow up in my face.

But fearlessly I shall speak.

1 Jesus healed the sick

The Holy Scriptures of the Church speak of Jesus who traveled throughout Israel, healing all sorts of people of all sorts of diseases.

We saw this morning, that He healed the mother in law of Peter. And then all the sick people of Capernaum were brought to Jesus; he healed many.

In the early morning thereafter, Jesus got up and went to a quiet place to pray. His disciples searched for him. The people had seen Jesus heal many in the power of the Holy Spirit, so in the morning, they flocked to his house. "Lord, everyone is searching for you".

Instead of going back to the house and healing more people, Jesus went to the neighboring villages. Why? He said: "so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

So even Jesus did not heal all people. And the fact is, all the people that Jesus healed eventually got sick again, and died.

In the days of Jesus, the average person would live about 30 years. In those days, there was no decent healthcare so the most minor diseases could be lethal. If a child survived the first few dangerous years, she might even become 40 or 50.

So what Jesus did, was important for the people at that very moment; many were very unhealthy. Physical or mental suffering is awful. We all know this is not how it should be.

And this is not how God created the world. You know the narrative of the Word of God. All was made well, but we, humans, spoil it.

We cannot blame God for disease and death. He is not the author of evil. But we are living in a fallen and broken world, and for Christians, just as for all people, disease and death will only disappear in the new heavens and the new earth.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul says this, in chapter 8:22-25:

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning [...] in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Yes, we have received the Holy Spirit. We are his temple. But in spite of that, together with all creation we groan for renewal - for the redemption of our bodies. And we must be patient.

So our bodies, and I like to add, our mind, our mental being, does not attain perfection in this life. We will never be fully healthy. We will always suffer from some deficit. And with aging, the health-deficit increases, as most of us know from experience.

So the healings that Jesus performed were at best very temporary events. And it was not the expectation in the early church that by prayer all people would be healed.

2 So why did Jesus heal people?

Why then did Jesus heal people?

Surely, God loves to make our lives better. But physical healing for the people in this life was not the ultimate purpose for Jesus.

If it were, why then did he not, with one powerful word, make all disease and misery disappear forever? Why not inaugurate the new heaven and the new earth immediately?

Jesus' healings were signposts, I believe. They were intended to show that his words are true, and that He is the Son of God who he claims to be.

Also, through his miracles of healing Jesus showed for all of us, the absolute benevolence of God for us, his people. God is good, and he desires all people to be healthy, happy, perfect and all that.

It seems to me that for those same reasons the Apostles also had these abilities as Jesus did. They needed to confirm before all people the truth of their words and that they were truly appointed by Jesus. God confirmed that the apostolic church is the Temple of his Spirit.

Through the prayers of the apostles we see some amazing miracles of healing. But never comparable to what Jesus did. Jesus was surrounded by miracles, while in the case of the Apostles, miracles were sometimes very spectacular, but actually rather few.

And even the apostles became sick and they were not always healed; their coworkers became sick.

The apostle Paul was sick - he speaks of a thorn in the flesh, and three times he prayed to God for healing, but God answered: "My grace is enough for you."

And Paul writes to Timothy that he had to leave his coworker Trophimus behind at Miletum because he was sick. (2 Tim. 4:20)

For the Apostles, sickness - or any form of misery - was not a sign of God's disfavor. It was not something that God promises to always do away with. It was rather normal as we are part of the one creation that groans for renewal.

3 And today?

We do have the absolute promise that God listens to our prayers; we know he knows our problems and worries, that is sure. And we know that he suffers with us - He lives in us, around us, we are His Temple. He is with you, always. Even when you are sick, troubled, suffering. God's presence means his his care.

He is with us through His Spirit. But that is no guarantee that He will solve our physical or psychological problems. He is not Santa who honors our wish lists. He is God who supports us.

Even Jesus assumed that in church, many people would be sick and not be healed. How do we know this? Toward the end of his life he said,

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. [...] Then the King will say [...], 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you. [...] For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' [...] 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

So Jesus assumes that till the very end of time, his brothers and sisters groan with the rest of creation: hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, in prison.

And how do we, followers of Jesus show our love for him? By caring for the poor and hungry, and **by healing the sick. Healing the sick? No, visiting** the sick. Helping them. Being with them.

And Jesus even identifies with sick Christians so much, that he says: "I was sick". An amazing statement really, that we will not try to unpack today.

Surely, when people have problems, we pray to God. When we are sick, we pray for healing. When others are sick, we do likewise. We share our desires with God.

But we ask humbly. 'If it is your will'. And often it is not Gods will, it seems. Then we must accept that only on the new earth, will we have perfect bodies and minds.

Actually, in most cases, God heals us even today - but we are often hardly aware of it. He made our bodies in such a manner that there is a self-healing mechanism. That may not seem spectacular, but it is really. We get many diseases, and even without help from a doctor, without medicine, our God-created bodies are able to push those sicknesses back.

And He has also given us doctors to help us, and medicine.

If someone is hungry, should he only thank God when the bread falls from heaven miraculously? Why would God even send bread to you from heaven if your neighbor can give it to you?

Why should God heal your broken leg miraculously, when the hospital and its doctors and medicine can do a great job to support your body's God-given power for self-repair?

When your broken leg is healed with the help of the hospital, it is still the God-created self-healing propensity of your body that does it. Doctors and medicine only help a bit, in most cases. So we thank God for healing us.

But sometimes, the body does not heal. Sometimes the mind cannot cope.

The mistaken idea that God wants to make all of us fully healthy today, is really trying to bring into our days, what God only promises for the future. Until then, we are part of a world that is broken and that is suffering.

In my native country Holland one particular church is very well known for praying for the sick, and they always speak of miracles. Never attested by doctors, by the way.

Right beside that church is a hospital. Funny really. If the claims of that church were true, that God wants to heal all who come in faith to him by an instantaneous miracle, then that hospital would be bankrupt within weeks.

If all the claims of faith healers were true, why does the world not flock to them? In my mind, clearly, it is because they promise much more than they can deliver.

I do understand the desire of mortally sick people to try them. But I also blame those preachers for promising to desperate people what they cannot deliver. Simply because this is not how God works. To make such promises to suffering people is very non-pastoral, to say it kindly.

I was preparing this sermon in the garden, here beside the church, when a good friend asked me for prayer. Her father in law suffers from dementia and his wife is severely physically handicapped. "Pray for them", she asked me.

'Lord heal his dementia and please may that old woman be healed from all her physical ailments'? Come on, do we really expect that to happen? 'No please', she said, 'pray that they will accept that they must go to a nursing home. And that we can find such a nursing home...'

Conclusion

We live in a world full of misery, and we Christians do not escape this. Bad things happen to good people.

Surely we pray to God to heal us. And we use doctors. In most cases, the cocktail of God and doctors works quite fine.

But we must all, at one time or another, accept that the diseases we have will not be healed. Then we trust in God's grace, we accept his comfort, and we wait for the glorious day when all things shall be made new.

"Behold I made all things new" is the Bible verse on the grave of my father who died of cancer when he was 42. He was a real follower of our Lord, and people who came to his sick-bed, said that they came with a heavy heart but they left encouraged.

When I turned 42, I felt strangely blessed. And this week I turn 56 - and I continue to feel blessed. I do not want to get sick, I do not want to die.

But bad things will surely happen. We then pray to God for healing.

And today we must now, while we are still healthy, train our hearts and minds not to panic but to trust in God and to be patient. One glorious day, our physical and mental renewal, will certainly come, when

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And in the meantime, today, His presence is more important than anything in life, even more important than our health. You are God's temple and he is with you, even to support you in hard circumstances.

AMEN