**Sunday 21 June 2020**

**Glynde Lutheran Church**

**Sermon on Matthew 8:1 – 17**

**Theme*:* “When sickness or suffering comes your way…”**

**“Trust and obey…”**

*Matthew 8:1-17 from Matthew DVD, or watch it on YouTube at* <https://youtu.be/PmK9Mvsyfqs?t=2902>

***Introduction:***

“How are you?” “Are you well?” I’m asking you these questions because I want to talk this morning about sickness and suffering, and the challenge that sickness and suffering bring to our faith, *especially when we go to God and ask for healing and nothing much seems to happen…. I guess that a lot of Christians have implored God for healing in his Carona virus pandemic time, and many have been healed, but some haven’t been healed.* Many books have been written about this, about what is often called “The problem of suffering”, or “The problem of unanswered prayer”.

Philip Yancey is one of my mentors, and he’s written a lot of books on this topic. You may have seen some of them, or even read some of them. There’s *Where is God when it hurts,*

*Disappointment with God,* and his more recently, his book, *Prayer: Does it make any difference?* A lot of people buy these books, and read them, because they are wrestling with the problem of what to do “when sickness and suffering comes our way…”, *which is my focus for our message for this morning….*

Well, what can you do, *or what do you do,* when sickness and suffering come your way?Well, let’s think for a while about this now, and let’s listen to what God has to say to us about facing sickness and suffering….

***Part 1: Some background***

Let’s begin by looking at our Bible reading for this morning from Matthew’s Gospel, because it’s this reading that has led me to focus this morning on “what God has to say to us about facing sickness and suffering”.

You know, it’s easy to watch this part of Matthew’s Gospel, *as we have just done,* and think to ourselves:

**“Well, Jesus healed people back then. Surely he can still heal people now…. So why isn’t he healing me, or my loved one, as I cry out to him for healing? Have I not got enough faith, or doesn’t he think that I deserve healing or that my loved one deserves healing?”**

Let’s explore an answer to this question that springs, I think, from reading and watching this part of Matthew’s Gospel:

1. Well, firstly it is important to note that Jesus’ healings were signs from God as to who Jesus was: that he was God’s “Messiah”, *God’s special King.* Matthew makes this clear in chapter eleven of this Gospel when he relates what Jesus said to the disciples of John the Baptist when John sent them to ask Jesus whether he really was the Messiah. John was in prison, and he was wondering whether Jesus was One whom God had promised to send “or should we expect someone else?” *(Matthew 11:1-3).*

Jesus answered John’s disciples:

“**Go back and tell John what you are hearing and seeing:** **the blind can see, the lame can walk, those who suffer from dreaded skin-diseases are made clean, the deaf hear**, the dead are brought back to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor. How happy are those who have no doubts about me” *(Matt. 11:4-6).*

In other words, Jesus is saying to John the Baptist’s disciples, “Go and tell John that the things that were promised in the Old Testament by the prophet Isaiah about the coming of the Messiah are now happening!

The prophet Isaiah stated that when God came to rescue his people:

**“The blind will be able to see,**

**and the deaf will hear.**

**The lame will leap and dance,**

**And those who cannot speak will**

**shout for joy”** *(Isaiah 35:5-6).*

Later on, Matthew relates that Peter recognized Jesus’ miracles as signs from God as to who Jesus was. When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?”, Peter responded:

**“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”** *(Matt. 16:16).*

The healings of Jesus, *and his other miracles,* were signs from God as to who Jesus was *(cf. John’s seven “signs” in his Gospel).* In the first instance, that’s why God empowered Jesus to do these miracles: to point people to who he was….

1. Secondly though, *and perhaps just as importantly,* Jesus’ healings are pointers to what the Kingdom of God will be like in all its fullness: that in God’s Kingdom *to come* there will be no more sickness, or suffering, or grief, or death… *(cf. John Chapman’s book, Making the most of the rest of your life).*

And isn’t this exactly what John the apostle is told by a voice from the throne of God that ‘heaven’, *God’s Kingdom,* will be like. John is told:

**“God will wipe away all tears…. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain”** *(Rev. 21:4).*

1. It is only when the Kingdom of God breaks into this world *as the Gospel is proclaimed*, that there are healings. God can, and does, heal in this day and age, but it seems to me that often He only heals when healings promote the spread of the Gospel….

That’s not to say that God doesn’t heal when and where he pleases, *according to His will,* it is just to say that from my reading of the New Testament, from my reading about what has happened in situations where the Gospel is being preached in countries for the first time, and from my experience, it seems to me that God often only heals people in a spectacular way in order to promote the preaching of Gospel in a new place or a new situation…..

Witness the fact that in the New Testament, Peter, Philip, and Paul for example are empowered by God to do “signs and great miracles” when they preach the gospel in places for the first time… *(Acts 3:1-9; 8:5,6,13; 9:32-35, 36-43; 14:3; 16:25-34).*

And listen to what Philip Yancey has to say in his book, *Prayer:*

**Reported miracles are far more common in developing countries. …the Church in Nepal grew dramatically as a direct result of physical healing.**

**I interviewed several doctors in Nepal, and each has told me accounts of healing that defy explanation: a baby born dead who began breathing, a woman’s severed facial nerve that still functions normally, a withered hand that straightened, and inoperable tumour that disappeared.** **Similar things happened in China…** *p. 249).*

Sure miracles are rare. Philip Yancey reports:

**Many times I have asked Christian doctors if they have seen a supernatural miracle. Most think for a few minutes and then describe one or two cases that may qualify.** Like Dr. Brand, **they allow for the exceptions while stressing their infrequency** *(ibid.)*.

Miracles are rare, but God still does miracles today according to His will, and often *it seems to me* when the preaching of the Gospel is promoted, *so that people sit up and take notice and listen to the preaching of the Gospel….*

***Part 2: The answer***

So let’s get back to a question for today: “When sickness and suffering comes our way, or the way of a loved one, what should we do?”

Well, can I share with you what I do, and what Jesus, God’s Son, and the writers of the New Testament books and letters *in echo of Jesus* tell us to do:

1. *Pray and ask for healing*
2. Jesus encourages us always to pray to our dear Father in heaven, and to ask Him to change our situation. Remember what Jesus said:

**“Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you…. Would any of you who are fathers give your son a stone when he asks for bread? Or would you give him a snake when he asks for a fish? Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?”** *(Matt. 7:7f).*

Go to God as a child goes to his or her loving father or mother, and ask God to give you what is you want or need, hoping as children do with their parents that mum or dad will give you what you want and need, and trusting that whatever they give you will be for your good *(cf. Rom. 8:28).*

1. Pray always, “Your will be done”, as we go to our Father and humbly ask for healing or for God to change our situation. After all, this is what Jesus taught us to say as we pray! Jesus told us:

**This, then, is how you should pray:**

**Our Father in heaven;**

May your holy name be honoured;

May your Kingdom come;

**May your will be done** on earth as it is in heaven

*(Matt. 6:9-10).*

And this is how Jesus prayed when he was sorely troubled, and when he wanted with every fibre of his being to have God change his situation. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when he was agonizing with God over whether he really *had* to suffer and die on a cross, *so much so that Luke tells us that “his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground”,* Jesus nevertheless prayed, “your will be done”.

Jesus prayed:

**“My Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me! Yet not what I want, but what you want**…. **Your will be done**” *(Matt. 26:39-42; cf. Luke 22:42).*

1. Ask for strength from God to cope with your situation, *especially if God doesn’t dramatically change your situation in answer to your prayer.*

Ask God to fill you with your Spirit, so that you will be strong in your faith in God as your

Loving Father and in Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, as you face the situation that you are in *(Luke 11:13; Eph. 1:15-20).*

I love the words of Paul in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth. Admittedly, he is speaking about tests, and trials, and temptations, but in the process he reminds us that God “will give…*us* the strength to endure”.

Listen again to what he says:

**Every test that you have experienced is the kind that normally comes to people. But God keeps his promise, and he will not allow you to be tested beyond your power to remain firm; at the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out** *(1 Cor. 10:12-13).*

1. Pray that God will use your situation to His glory: that, for example*,* through your sufferings *and the way that you bear your suffering with faith* you may have the opportunity to witness to others and to enable others stop and reflect about their relationship with God *(cf. John 9:3).*

Often when I visit people who are in Paliative Care in the various hospital dying from cancer, I pray with them that their faith and their trust in God might shine through to visitors amidst the bleakness of their dying from cancer…. And it seems to me that it does….

Listen to a couple of reflections from two Christians in this regard. Firstly, Joni Eareckson Tada, as she reflects in her book *A Step Further* on the fact that God didn’t heal her from her paralysis, despite her desperate pleadings…. She writes:

**“God…is always looking for an opportunity to demonstrate *His* greatness to mankind. Human suffering provides one of the best platforms to do this…. When people see the way that *Christians* endure their small but real frustrations with an uncomplaining heart of love, it points their attention to God, and He is glorified….**

**I really don’t mind the inconvenience of being paralyzed if my faithfulness to God in this wheelchair will bring glory to Him. Have you considered the potential glory your life can give to God if, in *your* ‘wheelchair’, you remain faithful?”** *(p. 34, 40, 41).*

And then there’s that wonderful answer from Godfrey Williams on the *Jesus, Then and Now* Bible study series t*hat I have* to a fellow cancer sufferer Tim Dean. Time has been cured of Hodgkins’ Disease, and Godfrey is just about to go into hospital for treatment:

*Tim:*

**At the moment there is some likelihood that you**

**will in fact not be healed and that your death will**

**come soon.** **Do you think that in some way God has let you down?**

*Godfrey:*

**No, I think in these areas you must always remember that God is sovereign and that all prayer is a request. It is not a push-button system and that you always get infallible results. You are humbly asking God perhaps to change the state that you’re in, and you’re hoping that He will work.**

**But He might say “no” and that is an answer that, I think, He has given me great peace to accept; and I’m quite prepared to accept that in some way a greater purpose might be sustained by my death in ways that I can’t understand.**

**It was the problem for Job as well: I mean this problem of “Why me!?”…. And I think that Job in the end came to realise that when he is confronted with God, as lot of these questions just disappear**. **You are completely convinced that God is love, and yet at the same time you’re not asking, “Well, why haven’t you done it yet for me?”** *(Video 4).*

1. *Always keep your eyes on Jesus, and his cross*

Which leads me on to our next point as we think about how I think that God wants us to respond when sickness and suffering comes our way: always keep your eyes on Jesus, and his cross, rather than on your suffering and the suffering of others *(Hebrews 12:1-3).* If you don’t, you can get lost in anger and frustration and doubt.

Listen to Helmut Thielicke, *a famous German pastor and writer,* another one of my mentors, who I listened to when he visited Australia when I was a student. He was talking about this, and he gave an illustration that I’ll always remember. He said:

**Now I like to explain this with a picture.... If you hold up a magnifying glass to a piece of fabric, a table cloth *for example,* then you will see the weave in the centre of the glass as clearly as you want, but around the edges it becomes blurred. That is the way I experience things when I see *the* mysteries of life, the strokes of fate..., suffering, and everything else which seems to contradict God. As long as I look through the middle of the glass, through the stable at Bethlehem and the cross of Jesus, then everything is crystal clear. But the further away I move toward the edges, the more blurred it becomes....**

**But then I know that the blur, all the I don’t understand, is not blurred in reality; it is a visual problem which has to do with the glass that I am using. I need to pull myself together by looking through the middle again** *(Thielicke Visit, Lecture No. 7, p. 7).*

Do you hear what he’s saying? If ever you don’t feel like trusting God, remind yourself that you *can* trust God by looking through the centre of the magnifying glass at the manger and the cross, *which together tell you just how much God loves you and everyone.*

And I would add, by looking at Jesus himself and the way that he loved and cared for people….

1. *Trust and obey…*

How should we respond when sickness and suffering come our way? Well, in the final analysis, I think God wants us to simply trust Him: to trust that He has us in his care, and that He is working for good in our life, *and through us, for the good of those around us* *(Rom. 8:28).* As Helmut Thielicke famously

put it:

**I don’t know the meaning, but I trust the one who does** *(Ibid.).*

And as the writer of that old hymn *that some of us sang before* puts it:

**Trust and obey,**

**for there’s no other way**

**to be happy in Jesus,**

**but to trust and obey** *(SLH #877).*

***Conclusion:***

May God bless each of us as we live out our life trusting Him who is our dear Father in heaven, and whose heart we know through Jesus, His Son… *(cf. the Children’s Message).*