

Sermon on Sunday 3 September

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: Philippians 4. 6-7 & Matthew 9.1-8



Healing Light (the ministry of prayer)

I'm both relieved and glad to say that even in my Middle Ages, I can still sometimes surprise myself. In fact, last week, I did it twice.

It was Greenbelt, a festival exploring activism, artistry and belief; an open-hearted, open-minded coming together of people who might or might not call themselves Christian, to engage with the stuff of being human and the big issues that face us all. It's a mix of live music, poetry, conversation, art, worship, protest, street-food and beer; quite a lot of beer! Right up my alley. Except, for one crucial thing; camping.

After several traumas involving shivering in cold damp sleeping bags as gales blew outside and rain seeped inside a flimsy, equally shivering nylon tent, I vowed to myself; 'never again'.

Imagine my surprise then, when in a particularly uncharacteristic moment, I decided to cancel the pre-booked king-size luxury bed with hot steaming showers at the local Premier Inn, to join the rest of my family under canvas. Brothers and sisters, I stand here today to testify that I have seen the light (around 5am in the summer, thank God for eye masks). I am now a born-again, pitch-perfect tent-dweller!

The second surprise came two days into the festival when I found myself singing along with the Islamic Call to Prayer. The Christian musician-mystic who led the session gave a beautiful interpretation of the word Allah as 'Oneness', and we sang an abridged version (without mention of the Prophet Mohammed, for example). I appreciate that that may be several steps too far for many Christians, but for me, there were no words in that abridged prayer that I disagreed with and I felt that deep connection that can sometimes only come through communal singing of ancient words to the Oneness who some call Allah, some call God, and who Christians call Christ.

In prayer, we are all just trying to connect with that Oneness, that Power greater than ourselves, which as Philippians reminds us can bring about a heart-sheltering peace beyond all rational understanding.

As I've said many times, I don't believe prayer is about changing

God's mind. Primarily, it's about changing us; our minds and our hearts. It reorientates us so we can more easily find ourselves in the will (or the flow) of God.

In prayer, we begin to see differently. In prayer, we tune in to the great Compassion that holds this universe together. In prayer, we actually (Stop the Press!) collaborate with that Compassion for the healing of self, others and all that is.

Prayer heals. And here, I think it's important to distinguish between healing and cure. As with our Gospel story this morning, there are beautiful examples of Christ curing the sick. And perhaps some of us have similar stories. The reality, however, is that prayer doesn't always bring about a cure, and I don't know why that is, but I do know one thing; prayer always heals.

It's possible, in fact, to die healed; healed from memories and historic hurt that haunt and control and belittle us; healed from shame and self-loathing; healed in our relationships; healed in mind and spirit, which, of course, often has a healing effect on our bodies.

Today, we re-launch something we call Prayer Ministry, where a team of trusted people who've received training will be available both during communion and after the service each Sunday to listen and to pray with anyone who'd value it. They'll be in the chapel and if someone is already there being prayed for, just loiter with intent. On some days, someone will be on the bench by the St Andrew's Centre, behind the church.

It's important to say that Prayer Ministry isn't advice giving or counselling. It's simply about holding someone in loving attention and healing light. Loving attention is about listening without prejudice, allowing someone to speak their truth; allowing someone to hear themselves. To be listened to, to be heard, is one of life's greatest gifts. And sometimes that's enough. All of this is completely confidential except, of course, when there's a safeguarding situation.

And it might be that we don't have the words or we're not ready to speak something, so it's totally OK to just sit in silence with someone who cares, someone who wants the very best for you. That person can be praying silently, picturing you held in the healing light of Christ.

We can come for ourselves or for someone else, or for both. And hear this - it is never a selfish, self-indulgent thing to ask for prayer for yourself. We all need and deserve prayer. And if you're thinking, "I'm too shy, too private, too self-sufficient, too skeptical, too scared, too whatever to try this"... Think again. It's never too late to surprise yourself.

In prayer, we bring our concerns, our burdens, and we lay them down with the Christ who longs to carry what we carry. We come asking for healing, wholeness, fullness of life. And sometimes we come simply to say thank you for prayers answered, for the grace and blessing that surrounds our every breath.

And, actually, this ministry is the ministry of everyone, not just clergy or the spiritually mature, whatever that means. To hold

someone in loving attention and healing light within prayer is our highest calling. So, I always think, there's no time like the present. Let's give it a go; silently.

But first, take a moment to ask the name of the person on your left and your right if you don't know them already.

So, now I'd ask you, if you're comfortable doing so, to close your eyes. And just imagine that you are sitting in a shaft of light, the healing light of Christ, of the Oneness, of whatever higher power you can believe in. You might want to have both hands open as a gesture of being open to that light. And just take a moment to sit with that light, imagining perhaps with those upturned hands that you're sharing or letting go of anything that feels heavy.

And now, as you silently name the person or persons beside you, imagine them in the same light. No words, just light; the light that lifts the burdened, that heals the wounded, that holds the sad.

Philippians 4. 6-7: 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

Matthew 9. 1-8: Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralysed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!"

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralysed man, "Get up, take your mat and go home." Then the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man