

Christian Healing, Sermon two: Rev. Bill Church, Wednesday 25 September
(Readings: 2 Kings 5.1-19; John 5.2-14)

This is the second of the sermon series on healing, which I have not found easy and you may be disappointed with the conclusions, which are vague, even by Brexit standards. This sermon looks at one Old and one New Testament wellness miracle, both of which have difficulties.

In most of the accounts of Jesus' healings there is some record before the event of virtue existing and being praised: a demonstration of faith by the sufferer, e.g. Woman with issue of blood (Mark 5); or on behalf of the sufferer, e.g. father of demoniac boy (Mark 4); or persistence, e.g. Syro-Phoenician woman (Matthew 15) or blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10); or good works, e.g. Centurion at Capernaum who built the synagogue (Luke 7) or Tabitha/Dorcas in Acts, who was "full of good works", (hence the waggish theology student who called his car Dorcas, in the hope that it, also, would be full of good works). But in neither of these healings is there any evidence of pre-existing good works or faith or persistence.

The man by the pool in John's gospel shows no faith except in the possibility of benefitting from a system which sounds superstitious even by the standards of those days, and unpleasantly competitive; only the first in gets cured. And he is not even doing anything effective; he has been there 38 years with nobody to push him into the pool, which was doomed to failure. He seems to be disabled also by despair (a branch of the sin of sloth?). But Jesus chose to cure him. Jesus noted in Luke's Gospel that it was Naaman the Syrian who was cured, but not any of the many home-grown lepers, and later, why was the deserving King Azariah of Judah "who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" left to live and die as a leper? Naaman cannot be said to have deserved to be healed. Rather the opposite. As leader of the Syrian army he was an enemy of Israel, and that, in OT terms, suggest an enemy of God.

The only faith he showed was in his King's diplomatic influence, and in the power of the money and gifts loaded up in his caravanserai – as if he was off to buy the best treatment Harley Street could offer. And he was an overly proud sort of man; offended when Elisha did not come out in person to greet the illustrious visitor, and offended by the smallness of the healing task prescribed by Elisha. But he was cured.

Neither cure was either deserved or predictable in human terms (so that the reasonable commentary about possible placebo or psychosomatic effects of believing that you will be cured cannot apply); both cures were free gifts from God in much the same way as Paul's doctrine of grace insists that grace is not deserved but a free gift from God.

Both cures showed the sheer power of God; Elisha had recognised the opportunity of Naaman's visit, so that "he might know there is a prophet in Israel" and more importantly that there is a God in Israel. In the healing by the pool, Jesus gave the healing with the words: "Take up your bed and walk" (exactly the same words used to the man let down through the roof, Matthew 2). But as it was a Sabbath, so Jesus was telling him to do something forbidden by the law of Moses, so showing his healing power at the same time as encouraging a move from the old covenant to the new.

Both were cured, but were they healed? Naaman's healing had happy downstream consequences. He learnt, we hope, to be more appreciative of folk less grand than himself, as it was his wife's little slave girl and his sensible servants who pointed him in the right direction. He learnt, we hope, the value of free gifts, as Elisha refused to receive anything from veritable treasure he had brought.

And, above all, he came to acknowledge the true God (albeit with a caveat about having to comply with the pagan Damascus state religion). So maybe he was healed as well as cured.

After the cure of the man by the pool, Jesus met him in the Temple, which suggests that he was at least offering thanks for his cure, Jesus greeted him with the rather ambiguous words: “See, you are well. Sin no more so that nothing worse befall you”. Perhaps Jesus was anxious that the man would not be able to rise above the 38 wasted years and would fall back into despair. And then, deliberately or inadvertently, the man got Jesus into trouble by advertising that it was Jesus who had cured him on the Sabbath. So maybe he was cured but not fully healed.

To sum up, miracles of cure or healing are not predictable nor do they always fall on the most deserving; they arise from God’s power and grace; and just as some may be healed inwardly even without a medical cure, so others may enjoy a cure without being fully healed.