

Sermon on Church's healing ministry – 15th October 2017
All Saints Church Wokingham by Canon David Hodgson

Readings: Philippians 4: 1- 9; Luke 10: 1 - 9

I think it is still true that the National Health Service or NHS England is the single largest employer by number of employees in the country. Leaving aside that the picture is now complicated by fragmentation into trusts and other bodies I wonder how many of you in this room either currently do work which is for the NHS or have worked for the NHS in your lives?

<A show of several hands>

Why do I begin with this observation? It's really because I want to make the point that health, healing and caring is a massive concern in our social and communal life - we devote huge resources of people's work, skills, time and money to health, healing and caring. Beyond the NHS there are also many other forms of involvement in work around health, healing and caring. How many of you who didn't identify as working for the NHS as such would say that you are involved in work whether paid or voluntary which is about health, healing and caring?

<A show of more hands>

Questions of how and where and from whom we access and receive healing and caring when we are sick or afflicted in some way are massively important questions for us as human beings and as communities. Bodily, mental and spiritual affliction and suffering are an inevitable condition of being human and so also therefore it is a significant part of our human and social life to apply to one another when we are afflicted our powers and resources of healing, recovery, relief and comfort.

I'm highlighting today this sometimes overlooked because so obviously in plain sight feature of human life – our quest for health and healing - because I want to attune our thoughts to the role of Christian life and community – the church – in healing. I want to say something, hopefully helpful, this morning about the church's ministry of healing. It's not going to be possible to say all that could and needs to be said about the church's healing ministry in the 10 minutes of this sermon. And I want also to put a spotlight on the prayer and healing ministry that we exercise here in this parish. Not everyone here may be aware fully of it; and today we are offering one of the elements of this ministry we have as a parish, prayer with the laying on of hands for healing within a Communion service.

Christian involvement in healing the sick goes back to Jesus and his first disciples. This we see in the gospel passage we heard from St Luke, which is taken from the bible readings set for Saint Luke's Day which occurs on Wednesday this week. Luke was described in one of St Paul's letters as a physician and so this week is a time when traditionally Christians reflect on health and healing. Indeed, this week's edition of the Church Times newspaper has many pages dedicated to the topic with a particular focus this year on mental health and emotional well-being.

In this gospel we read Jesus appointed 70 of his disciples to go ahead of him to towns and places where he was planning to go. They were given two objectives to perform in those places; firstly to cure the sick and secondly to tell them that God's kingdom had come near. Earlier in the same gospel we're told how Jesus had initially sent the 12 apostles also with the same mandate - to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal; having given them his power and authority over evil and illness. And of course, we don't need to read far into any of the gospels to be reminded that Jesus himself was deeply involved in healing the sick and releasing people from life-controlling conditions and behaviours, which in those times were understood to be demons. The Christian ministry of healing has its roots in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles. It's at the heart of our Christian belief and practice to seek God's grace and love to bring healing to the sick and afflicted – to be the hands and ears and voice of Jesus today. We believe that God longs to see people restored to fulness of life and wholeness. As Christians and Christian communities, we are being true to our faith when we do as Jesus did and urged his disciples to do, to bring God's healing;

praying for one another when we are sick, listening to each other's needs, being open as channels of God's healing grace.

The Christian healing ministry is rooted in prayer. At its heart is the ministry of listening. Listening helps to bring about healing because it offers compassion and discernment; the opportunity for those who are hurt to open up and tell their story of suffering in a safe and confidential situation.

The Christian healing ministry is a tangible expression of God's love for us in Jesus. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ which we witness to as Christians is not just a set of ideas about God's love; it is expressed in action, in service, in the prayer and healing ministry of the church it is brothers and sisters in Christ actually listening with compassion to us when we are hurt and afraid, praying and giving thanks with us on our journey of life, and offering the gracious touch, the very hand of Christ upon us. We are loved by God not only as souls but as whole beings, body mind and spirit, in all our frailties. And whilst our sickness and afflictions are most definitely not a punishment from God – part of the healing God brings to us in Christ is God's forgiveness of all our sins offering us the assurance that we can claim freedom from any power over us past failures hold.

So here at All Saints our prayer and healing ministry is delivered in collaboration with the clergy by a dedicated team who have discerned their gifts and calling in this area and done some training. This is our prayer and healing ministry team which we are growing with new members. They carry out a range of roles according to the different occasions and aspects of this ministry. So, there is a group of people within the team who pray regularly for those who are sick or in need of help, whose names they receive with permission. This is completely confidential. Others in the team working with clergy offer prayer and laying on of hands for healing at 9.30am Communion services every two months and then in the alternate months in between at 6.30pm Healing Services. The sacrament of anointing with oil for healing is also available from the clergy by request at these services. And also after every 9.30am service two members of the team are available for prayer ministry – ready to listen and to pray with anyone who would like this in complete confidence.

Also we pray corporately as congregations in our public intercessions by name with their permission for those who are sick or in need of support. Clergy and some of our lay pastoral assistants, which make up our pastoral care team, visit the sick at home or in hospital and pray or read the Scriptures with them; and our home communion team who are lay eucharistic assistants take the sacrament of communion to the sick at home or lead short services and distribute communion in residential care homes. Our bereavement care team too is also a form of healing and caring ministry being with those who are in the affliction of grief after the death of a loved one.

So to sum up, our healing ministry as a church at All Saints includes prayers and laying on of hands for healing within Sunday services, it includes a ministry of listening and prayer after every 9.30am service, it includes a healing prayer group who meet to pray confidentially for those who are sick– those ministries are carried out by the members of the prayer and healing ministry team. Our ministry of prayer and care also extends to visiting the sick at home or hospital; this includes taking the sacrament of communion to those who are sick or finding it difficult to get out to church, and to residential care homes. Then there is support for the bereaved from our bereavement care team.

Other groups and activities also have a healing and caring aspect – the All Saints Fellowship group meetings for example offer friendship, prayer and care for each other, as do our home groups; and the new Cornerstone Friday lunchtime club offers hospitality and friendship which promotes well-being and enjoyment of life. Our pastoral care team of clergy and lay pastoral assistants take a role as points of contact, co-ordination, prayer and leadership across the range of our healing and caring ministries here at All Saints.

Let me finish with this thought. Let's not forget that we the church are dispersed through the community all week long. And as Christians those who of you who indicated earlier that your work involved health, healing and caring are also part of God's ministry of healing in the world. You may not be able to pray outwardly or talk about your faith as a health practitioner in the public sphere without risking causing offence or breaching guidelines, but you may bring your concerns and lift your patients or clients to God in the privacy of your own prayers; and you may see your actions of medical intervention or care as sacraments of the presence of God's healing compassion at work in the world.

Finally, all of us can be as Christians part of God's healing ministry not because we are all directly involved in health and healing work, but rather because all of us are able to hold in our prayers those who are directly involved in the ministry of healing whether at church or in health and care services in the community. So if I were to ask the question again – who here today is involved in work which is about health healing or caring ? we might all put up our hands, if we count praying for others as a work. St Paul urged the Philippian Christians to be gentle towards each other, to remember that the Lord is near and to pray : "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God . And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus".