

# Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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## Introduction

Here we have Mark writing about healing. What does healing mean to you? Is about 'getting better'? About sin? About being made whole? Jesus in this text from Mark's gospel drives out demons and heals the sick. Being reconciled, made whole, is what holds this text together.

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## Text

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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## Comment

This reading from Mark's gospel centres on healing. On what healing means for those who are sick, in sin, or internal conflict. Mark designates this last group as those suffering by being 'possessed by demons'. I want to share a couple of stories about healing and what it means in relation to this reading.

I spent an afternoon a while ago in a big teaching hospital. One of the people I went to see that day was very ill. An elderly lady. She had had lots of medical intervention, and it might well save her life. But when I saw her, what she wanted was to feel better. To be made whole again. To be healed. I sat with her for a while, she asked me for a blessing and I gave her one. Nothing dramatic happened. She

may not get better from her illness. But when I left her, her husband thanked me for bringing her God's healing presence. What we are talking about in this reading – healing – is in my experience, not usually dramatic, and people may or may not get better from their illness. This lady and her husband are on a journey...a journey of healing in its widest sense, and they don't know what the outcome will be.

The second story I want to share with you is of a lady in Cape Town. I was in Cape Town recently, doing some research on reconciliation. As part of this, I attended a workshop to help people, through telling their stories, come to terms with their losses, their painful memories. So, this story was told by Revd Thembo, a female minister, and wife and mother in her mid-forties. She and her family had fled from the Democratic Republic of Congo to South Africa. She described how she had witnessed people being killed by rebel soldiers. She and her family – her husband who had been wounded, and six young children – then walked for ninety-six days to South Africa. 'Mummy, I'm hungry' and 'where are we going?' were hard questions to answer. At the border 'I watched my baby dying, [through starvation] and said, 'God! Heal my daughter or I won't forgive you!' Her baby survived, and 'a miracle' occurred when a passing truck driver took pity on the family and smuggled them across the border into South Africa – because the children were singing the same song his children did...

Afterwards, I talked to her, and asked how she felt now...years later. She said, 'God is still there for me, and although I find it hard to forgive him for the pain and hardship he caused me and my family, what happened to us was a miracle, and I thank God for it, and his love for us.'

She is on her journey towards healing, and it is hard.

So what is it that we expect when we ask God for healing? What happens in this reading as Jesus heals the sick and casts out demons? Well, the words used in the New Testament to describe health are derived from the meaning of the Hebrew word; *shalom*, sometimes translated as well being, or wholeness. Our journey towards health is a journey towards being whole, towards being 'fully human', but also acknowledging that sorrow and conflict are part of this journey.

So what is healing? And if it doesn't necessarily lead to people getting better, then why do it? And is it medical, or theological, or even spiritual?

Health, as defined by the World Health Organisation, is a 'state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity'. Healing then is 'directed towards illness, that is, the attempt to provide social and personal meaning for the life problems created by sickness'.

Healing then is the restoration back to life and salvation, to a 'right relationship with God.'

So, both in medicine and theology we see that health and healing are to do with more than the absence of illness.

When I qualified as a doctor, I recited the Hippocratic Oath along with my peers. We promised to do no harm, to treat our patients with dignity, to keep confidentiality. And we recited, 'With purity and with holiness I will pass my life and practice my Art.' Medical schools today are increasingly likely to include a course on spirituality, on healing and wholeness. Doctors are encouraged to treat the 'whole patient'; The Royal College of GPs advocates a holistic approach. 60% of

new referrals to Neurology outpatients have no physical cause for their symptoms. The view that healing is a return to wholeness is thus being embraced more and more by the medical profession, which is interesting given the huge advances in medical technology, the bias towards only using evidence from randomly controlled scientific trials.

The elderly lady in hospital, Revd Thembo and her children are all on this journey towards healing...and so are we.

I worked for a while at St George's Cathedral in Cape Town, where Archbishop Desmond Tutu was based during the apartheid era, a man who has himself walked a long journey towards reconciliation and healing.

Desmond Tutu says, 'In the end what matters is not how good we are but how good God is. Not how much we love him but how much he loves us. And God loves us whoever we are, whatever we've done or failed to do, whatever we believe or cant'.

Maybe what healing is all about then is just that – God's goodness and how much he loves us...I am not saying that we can always be healers, or be healed; or that miracles always happen, but maybe what we can, each of us, do, is accept God's love and to try to live out this message of healing, of new life, for our communities, for our world.

In the sacrament of the Eucharist, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing go hand in hand. It is not surprising then, that in the sacrament of healing, forgiveness may play a crucial role. This is of course not to say that ill health is a result of sin, but that the journey towards being reconciled with God is vital to our well being. One medical study looking at the process of recovery from post traumatic stress disorder showed that blood flow to a particular part of the brain increased when the patient forgave their assailant, after which recovery occurred. So forgiveness has been shown, in this study at least, to have a physical effect which can be validated on brain scans and bring about healing. Jesus, in healing the paralysed man, and many other examples in the gospels, shows us that forgiveness, or at least, the journey towards forgiveness, is often a crucial part of being healed.

Looking at healing from this view allows us to hold together both the grace of God's healing, and the ongoing reality of suffering. The sacrament of healing acknowledges that it is in Christ's wounded-ness that we can be healed. In a world which, lets face it, is not in a state of health.

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## Response

Spend some time reflecting on those parts of your life for which you need healing.

Spend time also reflecting on those situations in your life, or in your community, or in the world, where you can be the person or the voice or the presence of healing.

What is needed for this to happen?

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## Prayer

Lord Jesus,  
whose very presence is life-giving, and restoring

At sundown you healed  
In darkness you prayed.

Grant us the grace of your presence  
and the perseverance of your intent  
That we may not be overwhelmed by the darkness  
Nor submerged by the woundedness around us

But instead may we, like you, bring healing,  
and reconciliation and hope  
to the dark places of our world.

Amen