Healing in the Name of Jesus

Acts 5:12-16.

Holy Communion.

Emmanuel Youtube.

Sunday July 26th 2020

Many years ago, I think it was when I was in the sixth form at school, I had the wonderful opportunity of going to the last night of the Prom concerts in the Royal Albert Hall in London. The first and last nights of this great season, sponsored by the BBC, are so popular that you can’t just buy tickets; you have to enter a ballot, and this particular year a friend of mine was awarded two tickets and invited me to go along. Despite having tickets, we had to queue for several hours to get in because the arena at the front is the famous standing room and people queue to achieve the best places right at the front (so that they will be seen on tv). There was a real festival atmosphere there; lots of people in fun fancy dress, and also various musicians, ‘buskers’, if you like, performing to the waiting crowd, many of them very talented and accomplished music students trying to raise some money to see them through the next academic year. Now just imagine; what if one of those little groups of buskers had been so wonderful that the crowd had decided they would stay with them instead of going inside to experience that great concert. That would be really something, wouldn’t it? It would really have upset the RAH management, and the BBC who were underwriting the expenses.

That’s all ridiculous, of course, it would never happen, but in your imagination, transfer that to Solomon’s Colonnade in the temple courts in Jerusalem in the first century. Change in your mind the students busking before the concert to those first disciples, giving people, not a wonderful performance, but the best religious teaching they had ever heard – certainly far better ‘good news’ (gospel) than they would ever hear in the official teaching inside the temple. This was creating quite a commotion and attracting a crowd. We need to understand that the temple area was huge in those days, not just a single building like a large church. It covered dozens of acres and included lots of ancillary buildings including store rooms, meeting rooms, accommodation for the priests on duty, and so on, and this ‘fringe meeting’ was taking up one of the big open spaces. Not surprisingly, this all got the authorities worried. These were the guys they had threatened in court not to teach any more in Jesus’ name, and here they were, not only disobeying that, but also working all these amazing miracles. They got very jumpy, and we can well understand how it came to the point where people didn’t dare join the crowd, even though the new movement was so popular and gaining membership very rapidly as it had been ever since the Day of Pentecost.

I thought at first there was a contradiction here as I read our passage. At one moment we’re told people didn’t dare to join the apostles there, and the next we’re told in verse 14:

 *Yet more and more people believed and were brought to the Lord—crowds of both men and women.*

It’s not a contradiction. The movement was growing very fast, but this specific gathering was where people were nervous of joining.

Before we leave this picture, I want your imagination to take one final leap. You’ve already jumped from the RAH in London to the Temple Courts in Jerusalem. Now jump again, if you will, to the Weston Favell shopping centre or the little local shops at Rectory Farm or Boothville on a typical Sunday morning. Jo and I normally arrive at Emmanuel through the top door, having walked through the shopping concourse and seen all the people busy around the shops or enjoying their coffee at the Costa stall. How would it be if what we were offering in Church was so wonderful that the people out there were so attracted that they decided to join us ‘en masse’ instead of going into the shops? What would the shopkeepers and the management of the centre make of that?

We need to move on, for our subject today concerns mainly the healing in Jesus’ name. This was not just about providing urgent medical care like a mobile clinic turning up in a village in a third world country. This was about the power of God being unleashed, doing a new thing, a new creation even, demonstrating that God’s heavenly kingdom was breaking through into the kingdom of this world. This was what Jesus’ coming had been all about anyway. A thing I don’t think I’ve ever heard said, but I’m sure is true, is that this provided a new context in which believing in Jesus didn’t seem such a strange idea after all. Or to put it another way, these healings, miraculous healings, weren’t just an amazing spectacle performed to impress and to bring relief to suffering people. Much more than that, they were part of what was being taught concerning a God of love and compassion, and demonstrating in a practical way how that new order of God’s kingdom breaking in was actually happening. It was also a demonstration of God caring about the whole person. The teaching may have been largely (though not entirely) about spiritual things, but here was physical healing running alongside, teaching that God views the person as an integrated whole, and not separate soul or spirit and body.

What about today? It’s hard to imagine how anyone could resent people being healed, by whatever means as the temple authorities were, but think for a moment of how the established medical profession today tends to view and respond to the various alternative therapies that are around. Just imagine once again, if you will, a group of Christians performing many miraculous healings right outside one of the great teaching hospitals in our country. Wouldn’t that make a stir? (I’m not suggesting that we should do that though, there’s no Biblical precedent for being deliberately provocative for its own sake!).

So what should we be looking for today? It’s clear that God does lots of ‘new things’. Sometimes something miraculous happens somewhere that isn’t repeated anywhere else. There’s an example in today’s passage where people are healed by Peter’s shadow falling upon them. There’s no other recorded incidents of that. There’s another example later in Acts when, in Ephesus handkerchiefs were taken from St. Paul’s body and laid on sick people to make them well. We shouldn’t expect necessarily for healings to happen **like that**. Nevertheless, these things all happen within the general principle that God always wants to make whole people whole, whatever the means, and that is as true today as it was in the first century. At one level, yes, he works through the medical profession today. I believe that every healing comes from God one way or another. But there are also occasions when he heals in other ways, and often through his people calling upon him. I have read somewhere that we are not called to pray for healing, but rather that we should take authority and command it in Jesus’ name. That does seem to be the pattern in these early days of the Christian community, but I’m not convinced that’s always true. A passage in chapter 5 of the letter of James does tell us to pray for the sick.

So we need to be encouraged to expect God to work by a variety of means – the medical profession, alternative therapies, and miraculously because, as I say, all healing comes ultimately from him. You may well say to me, “but we don’t tend to see the miraculous these days, was that only for New Testament times?” My answer to that is that in some places around the world, in this country and overseas, miraculous healings do happen, and if they don’t here, perhaps it’s because we don’t expect them to. I think it goes back to what we have seen a little earlier in our studies in Acts, that the apostles prayed very much for boldness. I believe we (yes, I) need to be much bolder, both in our proclamation of the gospel, and also in stepping out in faith to heal the sick as we are commanded.