

Why He came

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

For many years in my last parish, and for many years in this parish I used to hold a monthly Prayers for Healing service after the evening service. There were never huge attendances at either service, but for those who came, there was something about the peace and quietness of that evening hour that was profoundly moving and spiritual.

We have those moments in morning services too, but there is so often so much more going on in the morning. All the hustle and bustle and the service seems bigger and more formal, and there are simply more people present. I'm not against having large numbers of people coming to worship, you understand!

However, in those evening hours, when a general stillness lay over the church and the city, it was hard not to become aware of God. A moving, gentle, searching, warming presence. When all else was stilled, when we who were at the service were stilled: God.

Laurie Lee in his hauntingly evocative memoir of a boyhood in 1920s Gloucestershire, *Cider with Rosie*, writes:

*The Church at night, in the dark of the churchyard, was just a strip of red-fired windows. Inside, the oil-lamps and motionless candles narrowed the place with shadows. The display of the morning was absent now; the nave was intimate, and sleepy. Only a few solitary worshippers were present this time, each cloaked in a separate absorption...The service was almost a reverie, our hymns nocturnal and quiet, the psalms traditional and never varying so that one could sing them without a book. The scattered faithful, half-obscured by darkness, sang them as though to themselves. 'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace...' It was sung, eyes closed, in trembling tones. It could not have been sung in the morning."*ⁱ

Mark's Gospel tells us of a time, very early in Jesus' ministry, when it was night-time. As the sun went down, people who had already heard about what Jesus had done, started to gather. Why had Jesus come to them, to us? To heal. Lots of other things too, but Jesus came to heal.

It started earlier that day in the Capernaum synagogue. A man with a troubled mind was there. Jesus spoke to Him, and calmness came. Simon-Peter's mother-in-law, laid low with a fever, worrying everyone out of their minds. Jesus came to the house, took her by the hand, and whatever it was that ailed her was lifted. In fact, we read that Jesus 'lifted her up', and the word 'lifted' is the same Greek word used later on when Jesus rose from the dead. It is a resurrection word. Healing is about resurrection; it is about new life.

Then in the evening time, outside the door of the house, they started to come. The anxious, the limping, the suffering, the left-behind, the ignored, the troubled in mind, the ones people were afraid to go near, the ones no-one listened to, the ones brought by their families, the ones who came on their own. Why did Jesus come? To bring healing.

In the synagogue, or church; in the private home; on the street. Jesus came to bring healing.

In our Old Testament reading we heard about God, and why God comes to the earth:

*"Have you not known? Have you not heard? He gives power to the faint...He increases strength...they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."*ⁱⁱ

God comes, Jesus comes, the Holy Spirit comes, to bring healing.

We don't get text-book descriptions of how Jesus did what He did. The only answer to the question 'What did Jesus do?' seems simply (simply?) to be this: He reached out, and He touched. We cannot dismiss as insignificant the number of times Jesus reaches out and touches. "There is one incident after another pointing to the power of touch. It might even be said that in Scripture touch is a metaphor for intimacy, for presence, for relationship...scientists and psychologists have conducted tests...on infant children that were deprived at an early age of human touch, with the results showing devastating effects on developmental skills and sociability."ⁱⁱⁱ

Why did Jesus come? He came to bring healing.

Healing comes in different forms. Sometimes illness, pain and suffering disappears. Sometimes we are given strength to cope with these things as we learn to live with them and adapt. There's nothing mechanistic about healing. Some might even argue that death, when it comes, is a form of healing, not failure; the final removing of pain and suffering forever. It's certainly what I say regularly at funeral services. In our living, in our hopefulness, in our fearfulness, in our pain, in

our health, the crucial thing seems to me to be that Jesus is there, right there beside us. It is why He came.

Our Church is now being used as a vaccination centre. I'm not great with needles so have not watched what happens here in our sanctuary when the medics start inoculating. But I have spoken to people who have come to Church as part of the programme, and at least three of them have told me something like this. "I was a bit nervous, a bit anxious. But there was a quietness and stillness in this huge space. When I sat down, and got ready for the injection, the doctor, the nurse, put their hand on my shoulder and spoke quietly to reassure me."

In this house of prayer, in this place of worship, healing goes on.

At our evening healing services when we held them, I would read the words from the Bible each time:

"Wait quietly for the Lord, be patient until He comes...God cares for you, so cast all your anxiety on Him...Come to me all who are weary, and whose load is heavy; I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble hearted; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to wear, my load is light."^{iv}

Then I would say:

Christ our Lord, long ago in Galilee, many who were sick and suffering needed friends to bring them to Your side. Confident of Your goodness, we now bring to You those who need Your healing touch.

And we would pray, not just me but the community of believers at that service, we would pray for those with illness and pain in their bodies, where a cure was difficult, or who suffered restless days and sleepless nights. We would pray for those with troubled minds, distressed by the past, or dreading the future; those who were trapped and cast down by fear. We would pray for those for whom light had been turned to darkness by the death of a loved one; the breaking of friendship; the fading of hope.

Each time in the evening quietness there would be a pause, as we thought of people we knew who needed healing, help, hope. And I would say: "Lord Jesus Christ, lover of all, bring healing, bring peace."

For those who wanted, they could come forward, and I would gently place my hands upon their head, and I would say quietly, "Lord Jesus Christ, Yours is the power to bring healing and comfort and peace. I ask for these things for Your servant here tonight." I would pause in the quietness, very much aware that this moment was not about me, but about God, and about the person with whom I was praying. My hands on their head would sometimes grow hot, I do not know why, and then I would say the blessing we always use at baptisms, and in other special times in the life of the Church:

The Lord bless you and keep thee;

The Lord make His face to shine upon thee,

And be gracious unto thee.

The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee,

And give thee peace.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, know His healing,

Know His peace.

Doctors, nurses, paramedics, First Aiders, parents, children, sisters, brothers, friends, strangers, ministers. I believe we all at different times have the power to bring healing. Different kinds of healing; no flashes of lightning, no razzamatazz, but the ordinary, everyday kind of healing that helps and holds those who need it. Through our listening, through our taking time to slow down and notice, through our accompanying, through our waiting, through our not having all the answers, through our silence, through our being there, through our touch. Just like Jesus, Who came to bring healing.

Health and safety and well-being are not the only signs of God's presence. God, through the people of Jesus, is right there beside those who hurt and fear. In good times and bad, in sickness and in health, in the times of recovery, and in the valley of the shadow of death.

It's not magic. It's not something we control. It's not mechanical – do this, and that, and what you want will happen. It is God, in Jesus, in us, being with. Bringing light, or sitting in the dark. Reaching out, with words, with a gentle touch, and reassuring that when we can do something, people need not be alone.

Of course there are times when bad things happen; of course there are times when we do not understand, or cannot explain, why this, and not that, occurs. I can't explain it. It's something to take up with God when we get to heaven. But for me, and for many, there *are* times, in the quiet, in the evening, when that 'something' happens, and the warmth steals over us, and we are reminded about, confronted by, the Jesus Who is with us. Bringing healing. It is why He came.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Laurie Lee, *Cider with Rosie*, p220

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 40:28ff

ⁱⁱⁱ P C Ennis, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol 1 p334

^{iv} Psalm 37:7; I Peter 3:7; Matthew 11:28-30