

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Third Sunday of Epiphany
Sunday 22 January
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sermon by the Dean of St Edmundsbury

Three fragments to frame what I want to say to you today.

My friend Canon Tim Goode, Rector of St Margaret's Lee in the diocese of Southwark lives with disability. He is going to be one of our Lent speakers in our series 'Fearfully and wonderfully made.' We chose the title based on a debate he introduced at General Synod in July in which he argued that people living with disability were not broken, damaged, in need of healing, but were 'fearfully and wonderfully made' in the image of God as they are. nevertheless, he was approached by someone very senior before the debate who wanted to be reassured that Tim still nevertheless believed in supernatural healing. 'But X' said Tim gently, 'I already am healed. What you see before you is a healed individual.'

My friend Lucy is dying in London. She has fought Pancreatic cancer for two years, gone through immense amounts of treatment, endured with phenomenal bravery, but now the end is drawing near. I have prayed for her from the day of her diagnosis, and I continue to do so. To what end? Why do I do it? Has it not been answered?

Dave (not his real name) sought me out in the cathedral a few months ago. His life had fallen apart, estranged from family, never having got over the death of a beloved sister, problems with drink and drugs. He didn't want anything except to sit and talk. Which we did for nearly an hour. As he left, I told him that there would always be someone here to listen to him, and asked if I might pray for him. He said I could. He hasn't been back. Yet.

Today we are reintroducing the laying on of hands with prayers and anointing for healing during communion. There will be people at the High Altar and in the Lady Chapel ready to pray with you, lay on hands and anoint.

So why are we doing this, and what is it that we think we are doing?

I do believe in a God who is active in creation, active through you and me, a God who endeavours, like a parent, like a lover, like a friend in and through every situation of crisis and desolation and pain. I believe that God through the hands of the skilled: doctors, nurses, carers, therapists brings healing. I also believe that God works through the attentiveness of those who are present, to help, listen, offer practical care. But I also believe that God works through prayer. I'm less sure how, except that I believe it to be, in its own way, essential as well.

What I don't believe is that it happens in a cause and effect way, in others words, that what prayer is about first and foremost is effecting a cure. If that were the case then what about my friend Lucy who is dying? Was our praying not effective enough? Does God make choices? A God who made

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such choices would not be God to me, but a controlling monster. No, I believe the effect of prayer is different, more subtle, less tangible, but no less crucial.

We know little about the correlation between knowing that you, or someone you love, is being prayed for, and the way you and they navigate the landscape of suffering, but I have so often been assured that it has helped...even if those who gave me that assurance were less sure about how they could describe the benefit in concrete terms. That it mattered, that they needed it, that it was part of the whole therapeutic process: of that they had no doubt.

What prayer is not, is magic. What we offer today and from now on on Sundays is part of the loving encounter with God and us which we make visible at every Eucharist, where the most simple and every day act: sharing food and drink, is made the most radical act we can undertake: that this altar has no boundaries, no test for admission, and is open to murderers and abusers as much as it is to saints and heroes. And in the encounter where bread and wine have spoken over them the words of Jesus himself, they and the moment and we are transformed into something new, a glimpse of the banquet of heaven, a taste of Bethlehem, where the bread of God's love is brought to birth, and Calvary, where the redeeming blood and water of forgiveness and reconciliation flow down. and the laying on of hands, the healing touch of anointing, the attentiveness and listening of prayer are part of that process of encounter, which is true healing.

If there was any healing for Dave in his conversation in the Lady Chapel those months ago, and I hope and pray there was, it was that someone listened to him, prayed with him, told him that he was loved, and not nearly as far away from God as he thought he was, and indeed, that God was with him wherever he went, and waiting for him with arms opened wide in mercy and forgiveness.

So prayer is not magic, and healing is not a crude transaction whereby if I ask hard and often enough I'll be made physically well again. and so often we learn that, like my friend Tim, when we see human bodies different from what the world thinks of as normal, what we are actually seeing is already healed, already altogether lovely in God's eyes, or as those great saints who knew inner darkness and depression taught us is that this too is a means of God's loving touch. So perhaps sometimes we need to widen a rather narrow understanding of faith and healing. What we think needs to be healed, is already healed, and what we think to be broken, is itself a source of healing and redemption.

As the prayer found on a scrap of paper next to the body of a girl found dead in Ravensbruck concentration camp said:

"O Lord, remember, not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will.

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But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have borne, thanks to this suffering: our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgement, let all the fruits we have borne be their forgiveness.

Fruits of Healing in a concentration camp? How can this be possible? because those who lived and died in that place of horror had eyes opened to see, even there, those fruits being borne.

Tim is already healed.

Lucy will die, with we hope, peace and the banquet of the Kingdom awaiting her.

Dave may remember in his darkness that this place, and God's love awaits him, should he choose to return.

None of this is to downplay the reality of pain, and alienation, of human wickedness and sin. But prayer is a transcendent openness and attentiveness to see what God is doing, patiently and slowly, and sometimes imperceptibly in the warp and weft of the fabric of human lives where suffering and pain are frequent visitors.

What we start to offer again today is that attentiveness and openness; for you, for those on your hearts and minds.

With the gentle touch of oil and our hands, which like your hands, are the tools of healing that Christ has left to us.