

# “Physical and Spiritual Healing”

Mark 1: 21-28

Epiphany 4B, Boise, 2020

Last Sunday, we heard Deacon Ron preach on the first call story in St Mark’s Gospel, which was most likely the first written. The two brothers Andrew and Peter, then another two, James and John, answered the call to be Jesus’ disciples. After that, Jesus got to work in His home region, Galilee. The Evangelist St Mark, to show us what that work consisted of during the three years of His public ministry, now relates several miracles of healing. In this first one we read about today, the visible symptoms of the malady are not even described. The Evangelist tells us only the method of healing. When Jesus was preaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, a man possessed by evil spirits spoke, giving voice to them: “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God!” Jesus ordered the spirits to be quiet, and then to come out of the man. They shook him violently, and “came out . . . with a shriek.” The other Jews present were amazed. “What is this? A new teaching — and with authority! He even commands evil spirits and they obey Him.” News of the exorcism spread quickly throughout Galilee. In the following story in Mark’s Gospel, the whole town gathers at a door where Jesus is staying, and He heals “many who had various diseases,” by driving out the demons that were causing them.

This past week, in your daily reading of the OT, you had stories of the second and third generations of the patriarchs, Isaac and his twin sons, Esau and Jacob, each of whom will produce a nation by his wives. The patriarchs in Genesis did not perform miracles. That was not their thing. The miracles that God performs by men don’t begin until Exodus, the book that follows Genesis.

They come by the hand of Moses, in the pharaoh's court and throughout the rest of his life, as the people He is leading have need. The miracles assure them that Moses is getting his directions from God — that he is a true prophet.

Jesus' miracles of healing as reported by St Mark serve a similar purpose. They give credibility to His preaching that the Kingdom of God is at hand: "A new teaching — and with authority!" To have a teaching accompanied by miracles, however, was not new to the Jews. They recalled the earlier miracles of Moses, who also had a lot to say. God sent Moses on a mission to liberate his countrymen from the pharaoh's yoke. The Messiah demonstrates here the redemption God is bringing to men and women by Him whenever He frees someone from the evil spirits who are making him or her ill. He proves to those who witness His miracles that He has power over the demons, and consequently that His message that the time has come for mankind's liberation from the Devil's bondage is authoritative, that it is from God.

So, you see, in the ministry of Jesus that St Mark now begins to describe, the teaching and the miracles work together, just as they did for Moses. Our Lord tells the people that He is freeing them from Satan and giving them the power to resist his subsequent temptations. Then He adds an object lesson. The ancient spirits cower before Him, and call out, identifying Him to the people of Galilee. Jesus, who doesn't want His full identity revealed to His countrymen quite yet, orders the demons to be silent. Then He orders them out of the man or woman they have been keeping in bondage and afflicting with some kind of illness. The deaf hear, the dumb speak, the lame stand up and walk and lepers are cleansed, the madman is made sane — everyone who responds to Jesus' message is freed from the Devil's power.

You heard Moses' prophecy in our OT reading that God would send Israel another prophet after Him. God in fact sent Joshua and many more. Mark the Evangelist, in these stories he tells, describes the work of Israel's greatest

prophet of all. The liberating miracles of healing, all of them exorcisms of one kind or another, give us the main theme of the Second Gospel. It is the same as that of the First Gospel, which we studied last year: God has sent Jesus, a king by His descent from David, to surpass the work of Moses. He leads us on the New Exodus to a land better than Canaan. The journey consists of a progressive freeing from the various forms of bondage that cripple our spirit and prevent us from living life to the full, which is life with God: the guilt of past sins, all the different addictions that rob us of our freedom, the vices that drag us down — gluttony, lust, greed, sloth, anger, envy, and pride, which is self-worship. God, by His Anointed One, will free us from them all if we accept Him as Our Liberator. He will, in the end, free us even from death. We will, like Jesus, leave behind an empty tomb.

The Gospel is an exhilarating message to audiences of every generation. But there is a difficulty for us modern folk in the way St Mark presents it. The difficulty is his depictions in the miracles of healing of demons as the source of most illness in human beings. The connection is not explicit in our reading today, but it will be in most of the other miracles that Mark reports. Must we now revise his presentation of Our Lord's healing ministry now that we have science? I am a priest, one empowered to include exorcisms in his blessings, yet I, like the rest of you, am waiting for my vaccine to protect me from the coronavirus. Prayers of healing, along with blessings and anointings, belong to the clergy's stock-in-trade, and we offer them freely, but usually as an accompaniment now to the scientific marvels of modern medicine. The creation of a vaccine that uses messenger RNA to provoke our cells into producing the exact antibodies needed to ward off the disease is a feat that amazes anyone who knows even a little biology. Of what power is my exorcising prayer, in comparison with that? Even our Prayer Book provides petitions that ask mainly

that God be with those who administer their medical arts to the patient and that He “prosper the means for his (or her) cure.” Who has the greater medicine, the doctor or the priest?

And the answers that Christian ministers now give to those questions vary a great deal — as if, as a class, we aren’t really sure. A few Pentecostal clergy would have us simply imitate Jesus and the Apostles and order the demons out of everyone we encounter who suffers from a physical or mental malady. Yet even most of them still go to the hospital for a medical emergency. One theory I have — and it is only a theory — is that God provides miracles more abundantly in certain times and seasons. The Bible itself tells a 2,000-year-old story. The miracles it records are not distributed evenly over the centuries. In the OT they come by the hand of only four different prophets: Moses and his successor Joshua; then much later by Elijah and his successor Elisha. In the NT, the miracles occur throughout, but again over just two generations. In Church history, miracles seem to be abundant when a new region is evangelized. And that actually fits Mark’s logic. When a society first encounters the Gospel, the miracles are a visible demonstration and add credibility to a message that the people haven’t heard before. In Africa today, there are duels between preachers and witch doctors. When Christian blessings cure maladies that the traditional incantations cannot, the village accepts the Gospel, and sometimes even the witch doctor is baptized.

Yet most African Christians will take the Covid vaccine, too, when it becomes available to them. Instead of having to choose between spiritual and physical healing, can we conceive of a way that they might be compatible, or even work together? In historically Christian countries such as our own, the demons have largely been cleared away and lurk on the periphery, looking for openings in those who have spurned God’s protection or have badly strayed. I

do get requests for house blessings from parishioners who have questions about the activities of the previous occupants. The prayers that constitute those blessings are ancient and in the form of an exorcism. If you look up the origin of the word “exorcism,” you will find that the meaning was simply “a solemn renunciation.” The first vow at a traditionally-performed baptism contains a renunciation of “the Devil and all his works” [1928 BCP]. So, you see, we have not stopped believing in the existence of evil spirits, even if, in a country where the practice of the Christian religion is widespread, we don’t consider them to be quite the menace they once were.

But let us return in closing to the Evangelist’s theme of Christ as the new Moses, bringing liberation to mankind in a new and greater Exodus. That liberation has advanced over centuries and is still being taken by evangelists to new regions, often accompanied by medical doctors. Modern science and technology create new problems from time to time, but overall I think most would agree with me that they have been a blessing. Many books have been written that trace the roots of modern science, with its methods of observation and experimentation, to the medieval universities of Western Europe, which were founded on Christian principles. The Christian doctrine of Creation, asserting that a single, transcendent Deity fashioned all things and ordered them by His Logos (His Logic), caused a revolution in the way people thought of nature — as something governed by law, God’s law, and not the whimsical deities of the old pagan cults. We may thus regard the science we have today, including one of its fruits, medicine, as a product of Christian civilization.

Yet in praying for someone to get well, asking God to “prosper the means” the physicians have determined for his or her “cure,” we are also acknowledging the spiritual reality that lies behind what our five senses can detect. We ourselves are embodied souls; so illness cannot be overcome by merely

surgery and pills, and infections cannot prevented entirely by vaccines. For the healing of body and soul together, we address or petitions to Him who made all things visible and invisible. You can now hear the stories of the present pandemic. With the ICU's of many hospitals full and understaffed, and nurses and attending physicians exhausted, the chapels have getting a lot of use — and rightly so.

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