

Sermon Notes for Trinity XII

"Be opened" (Gospel)

This is a narrative which even the sceptical ought to respect, because it has all the strange features of actual events. Only in life, where all sorts of reasons intervene, and not in fiction, does one go from the coast to Galilee via the Ten Cities, which lay even further inland and to the South – a "dog's hind leg" indeed, or a journey to Birmingham by way of Beachey Head. The theoreticians of the oral transmission of gospel stories assume that detailed descriptions (especially those which make it appear that healing was not an effortless work) are rapidly lost, yet here we have just such details, including the Aramaic used. So this narrative comes, I think, from very close to the original events (whatever we may want to say about other miracles), even if the way the command to "tell no man" is ignored does seem to be a fascination of St. Mark.

Now the modern world assumes healing miracles never happen, but outside that world they are common currency. Jesus could not prove much about himself by healing because many religious figures did it (though we should remember that the Baptist was commonly accepted as a prophet even though he did not heal). It was not surprising in Judaism that a "man of God" should heal. Equally, it was not essential. The gospel writers do not multiply healing miracles; Mark and Matthew content themselves with a dozen healings, a number intend to convey a sufficient sample rather than a comprehensive list. The other evangelists are similarly restrained. So this is a part, but no more than a part, of Jesus' mission. Retained in the Gospels because the events happened and were significant; not because they were the core of the story.

So what is that mission? The gospels at one level demonstrate how Jesus implements a programme prophesied in Isaiah 61, in which mental and physical healing (not to mention the release of prisoners) are found conjoined with "the poor have the gospel preached to them". This programme is not separate unrelated activities, I think, but a single coherent mission "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord". Jesus can of course no more in conditions of humanity heal everybody than he can preach to everybody in a brief ministry; both would equally exhaust him, or would show that he was not human. It is well to remember that it is equally a heresy to deny the Humanity as to deny the Divinity of Jesus; his human work could never be other than limited.

In neither healing nor teaching can Jesus force the situation; miracles are impossible where there is lack of trust in God, and teaching God's will does not always succeed, even when Jesus is Himself the teacher. To ask more is to ask for magic, which is not God's way with man.

We can draw simple advice from this passage. We all have our impediments, some physical, some intellectual. We all need to "be opened". And, whatever may have been appropriate before the Passion, we should not now be inhibited in proclaiming the Good News, so far as we can in these times of persecution. Do not despise simple truths; in this life, Christians never make so much progress that they can afford to forget the basics!

Ought the Church to take hints from this mission of the Lord? Yes, of course. But from the whole of it. Not preaching in isolation, not praying in isolation, not just visiting the sick in mind or body as a duty (which it is), not even just caring for the sick, but working for their healing. The Church of England was very mistaken when it abandoned both Unction and the Laying on of Hands, for fear of superstition or of the search for merely "transitory promises". On the other hand, it is not wrong in continuing, as far as the state tolerates, some ministry to the sick (and to prisoners for that matter). It, and we, must believe in the possibility of transformation by God's healing power. We must not try to be wiser than the Lord in our ministry, whether clerical or lay.

"Ask for great things, and small things shall be given you." This is an alleged saying of Jesus not found in the Gospels; I do not instruct you to receive it as genuine, but to consider it as sound spiritual advice. It is too easy to assume that God will do nothing through us – and thereby to ensure that our practical unbelief has its natural outcome. So we must seek to receive - and impart - God's total promise. Now is the acceptable time.