

Healing

Two months ago, in August, there was a local Christchurch news story which made waves around the world. A Christian Healing Room had opened in Linwood. It was set up like a clinic where people with medical problems could come and receive prayer.

The two pastors interviewed claimed that many people had been miraculously healed just by praying and laying on hands in the name of Jesus.

Two days ago, on Friday, I received an email from my brother Paul in Brazil. He had been conducting a Christian prayer seminar in northeast of the country and wrote this:

"On the Sunday night we had a very special time of physical healing and there were a number healed of back problems, a lady was healing of a blind eye and another, who couldn't read her Bible due to far-sighted vision, was almost instantly healed. One young man was healed of a shoulder pain and then, later, a swollen ankle that he had (which apparent had been in plaster cast) went down as we prayed for it. There were many other healings which I can't remember now!"

Yesterday I attended a small church that meets in the Shirley Working Men's Club. They have been running for about two months and are focused on healing prayer. I spoke briefly to the couple leading it and to some of the people attending, and they say that healings have happened here too.

Is it possible that God really heals today, the same as he did in Jesus' day?

Today is the feast of Saint Luke the Evangelist.

We know little about Luke except that Church tradition attributes him as the author of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. He was probably Greek; he may have been a free man or a slave. He appears in Paul's letters as a close friend and support, and in Colossians Paul calls him 'the beloved physician'. For this reason Luke is the patron saint of doctors.

The reading today from the Gospel of St Luke draws our attention to the ministry of Jesus as a healer.

But more than that I would like to look at what else this passage shows. In the sending out of the seventy disciples as Luke describes, Jesus appears as more than just a healer. He is someone who is able to teach others how to heal.

The miracles of Jesus have always been a puzzle to understand from a scientific point of view. In this modern age we are quite used to the idea that medicine is one science among many, and that our physical bodies obey regular and predictable laws. For centuries now we have been able to look at cells under a microscope, and see their various components. The idea has become accepted that the human body is nothing but a very complicated machine,

and that once we finally understand all the parts and how they interact, we will be able to achieve perfect health. And in many ways this approach seems to work. We now have drugs and surgical procedures which can accomplish great things. Our lifespans are longer and we seem on the whole much healthier than ever before.

Of course our Western medical system also has its downsides. It is increasingly expensive, it is not always available to the people who need it most, and the tendency to treat people like machines can lead to us feeling neglected as people even when our bodies are receiving the best of care.

When we look at Jesus, we see a very different picture. He turns our modern idea of medicine upside down.

Jesus seems to be a person who focused first on the person inside and only second on their bodies. And yet, despite this, the Gospels report that he healed many people - so many, that he attracted large crowds. The methods Jesus used seem strange to our Western ears. He used no microscopes and no surgical instruments. Just prayer and faith in God as a loving father.

And it's written that he taught others how to do this. Saint Luke's second book, the book of Acts, carries the story forward and shows Jesus' disciples, the early church, spreading across the Roman world, doing the same things: preaching and healing the sick.

The strange thing is that when we look even a few centuries later, it seems like this gift of healing vanished almost completely from the Christian church. There are healings attributed to Christian saints, but they seem to have become rare and far between. And yet, interestingly, people still believed they were possible.

By the end of the 18th century faith in miracles of all sorts had faded to such an extent that Thomas Jefferson in 1820 famously produced his own rational version of the Bible with all the miraculous stuff cut out.

But the interesting thing is that it's also in the 18th and 19th centuries where we see miracles of healing in the name of Jesus starting to come back on a large scale.

The Anglican evangelist John Wesley, who founded Methodism in the 1700s, was one of the first I know about in what we'd call the modern age. Wesley reported many 'supernatural' events during his meetings, including healings. He wrote a textbook for the poor on health care, pushed for social reform, and even experimented with electricity. To Wesley all of these things, the natural and the supernatural, were part of God's creation. In modern terms his approach to medicine would probably be called 'holistic'.

In 1840s Germany, a Lutheran pastor called Christoph Blumhardt experienced a 'revival' in his hometown which included many dramatic healings. For him the secret of healing was confession, repentance and forgiveness. However, the healings so embarrassed his church denomination that he was asked to stop. The idea of miracles was strange to many people.

Around the 1860s an American lady called Mary Baker Eddy started her own church

focused on healing - Christian Science - after being miraculously healed while reading the Bible. I think she was one of the first people to think seriously about how miracles can exist in a scientific world. Her philosophy was that since God is good, sin and sickness must be unreal. Her ideas are not always easy to follow and she caused a lot of trouble for her followers by refusing ordinary medicine. But there do seem to be reports of people being healed at least during the early stages of that movement.

At the turn of the 20th century there suddenly came a whole wave of Christian preachers - the Pentecostals and the Healing Evangelists - who rediscovered the experience divine healing. The Canadian John G Lake, who founded the Healing Rooms I visited, was one. There were many others, both men and women: Smith Wigglesworth, William Branham, Alexander Dowie, Kathryn Kuhlman, Aimee Semple McPherson, and more.

Unfortunately a lot of the early Pentecostal churches became very critical of others and spent a lot of their time fighting each other and turning their back on society. And yet the idea of divine healing didn't go away.

After World War II, there was a second wave called the Charismatic movement, in which healing came into the mainstream denominations. One of the earliest Charismatic writers was the Anglican lay preacher Agnes Sanford. In her book *"The Healing Light"* in 1947 she writes about teaching injured soldiers to pray and visualise God's healing power as a gentle white light.

Since then, there have been many movements and churches founded which believe and practice healing. One of them was the Vineyard, started in California in the 1970s. In the mid 1990s a Vineyard church in Toronto started seeing a huge number of healings, both physical and psychological, and many church people from different denominations visited there. The 'wave' of healing faded away a few years later, but some ministries have carried it on.

A documentary in 2007 called *'Finger of God'* describes some of these healings in Christian churches from all around the world. Also in 2007, Brian Broom from the Arahura Clinic just a few blocks away in Barrington, released a book talking about his life's work in mind-body medicine. He sees healings happen after counselling. They are not always fast, but they often do happen.

Divine healing is a difficult thing to comprehend - and yet, I believe it happens. I believe it's happening right now.

There is a dark side to healing though. Sometimes despite all our prayer a miracle just doesn't happen. That can be very painful - especially if you've seen a miracle happen before and know that God **could** do something. Some people have been badly hurt, by being told that it's all because of their lack of faith.

I don't think God punishes us for not believing. I also don't think that healing is really a reflection on us in any way at all, either good or bad. I think God does what's best for us at all times, and sometimes the best way we can grow spiritually is by learning to live with the life we have.

But I do think that sometimes miracles *do* happen. And I think that they can happen more often when we are open to the possibility.

In the "Finger of God" movie there is a scene where some young Christians are learning to pray. They go out on the street looking for people to pray for. They meet a man who has had a wounded leg for years. They pray while the cameraman looks on. The leg heals as they do and the man is startled. He walks off no longer limping.

It's an exciting scene. (And I don't think it was made up, although it could have been.) But I had to wonder: what did that man have to wait so long? Where were those healers when he first needed them? If it was so easy, why don't we all know how to do it?

In the book of Luke, we see Jesus sending out his disciples into the ancient world to heal and bring a message of peace. In many ways, I think we all do do this today. As Christians we all seek to live as Jesus did and we are challenged every day by his life and message. In this congregation we each go out into the world and live as lights in our communities. And we have many worthy causes, both small and big, which we can choose to be involved in.

But for me, I'm very interested in this idea of divine healing. I think it's because I'm envious of the stories I'm hearing around me, from people like my brother, the folks at the Healing Room, and the church I visited yesterday. I've heard and seen enough now to know that divine healing does happen; what I would like to find out is if *I* can be involved in it in some way. I want to know if God can use *me*.

I would like to think of Jesus as more than just a good person and more even than just the Son of God.

I would like to know that Jesus is actually a *teacher*, someone who is present here and now to help pass on what he knows.

I know that miracles don't always happen, and I accept that when they don't, it's for a good reason.

But I would like to be open to the possibility.

I don't know if any of you have been thinking along the same lines.
If you have, I wonder if you could pray this prayer with me, silently.

Father, you have given us a wonderful gift in Jesus and in the Gospels which tell us about his life.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus taught others how to live.

I would like to be open to doing the same sort of things that Jesus did.

I would like to love like Jesus did.

I would like to heal like Jesus did.

I would like to pray like Jesus did.

Jesus said that all good things have been given to me.
Teach me how to unwrap that gift.

In the name of the father, the son and the holy ghost
Amen.