

Mark 6 of a Healthy Church: Makes room for all

Isaiah 65: 17-25; Matthew 8: 1-13

Both of the readings today carry the themes of restoration, recreation and renewal - both of the natural world and of individuals who are healed, restored and forgiven.

Isaiah 65 gives us a vision of peace, unity and harmony; it presents the Kingdom ideal. In the new creation there will be no predators or predatory behaviour; there will be safety and security, fairness, justice – and the God who is utterly just will be near. No one will work for nothing.

Matthew 8 is less of a prophetic ideal and more of a report on the grounded reality of Jesus' earthly ministry. When onlookers saw Jesus perform these signs they were witnessing the new age of God's kingly reign breaking into time and space.

When Jesus enacts any healing it is more than purely physical; it is the complete restoration of a person spiritually, psychologically, emotionally and physically back into society. It is also fundamentally about restoring a person's relationship with God.

Take the Leper – unclean, a sinner. Disease was thought to be the result of sin. According to the theology of the time, the Leper probably thought God was of a mind with the prevailing opinion; that he was a cast-off, expendable, deserving to be marginalised.

'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.'

The Leper presents Jesus with a choice. He is not sure how is regarded – how Jesus will act. Has Jesus got any time for him or not?

The faith of the Centurion displays similar humility and trust. Both the Leper and the Centurion know Jesus can help, but how will he react to them and their requests.

The Leper and the Centurion are both unclean; one with disease and one because of his ethnicity, and because he serves with and for the enemy occupier. The centurion is even reluctant to have Jesus come to his house. He has faith that Jesus' word is enough.

Both the Leper and the Centurion recognise the divine authority in Jesus to heal, reconcile and bind together.

Jesus is amazed at the faith of the Centurion and states that the Kingdom of heaven will be open to people from all over the world, of different ethic and cultural backgrounds. In Jesus there is unity and equality for all peoples who believe in him. As St. Paul would later write: *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus,”* (Galatians 4:28).

These verses give us a picture of what the church should aim for. Jesus models a welcome to all who come to seek him, regardless of their background and history. He doesn't ask people to confess a creed or make an act of repentance before he heals them. There are

no terms and conditions to read and accept before Jesus agrees to share God's healing love with those who seek it.

The welcome of the Church is called to imitate the welcome of Jesus. The welcome itself can be a profound act of healing to someone who feels excluded from other places in society. I have often heard it remarked that churches are full of cranks. Absolutely they are! And rightly so.

Church can be the last resort, the last refuge for some people, who, like the woman suffering with the haemorrhage for 12 long years, have nowhere else to go. This is why how we welcome people really matters.

But welcome is only the start of including people into the life and relationships of the church, and something I'll be addressing in a few moments. But the welcome isn't vacuous. It is a welcome into a new way of living and being in Christ. Everyone is welcome but certain behaviours have to stay outside the door – or at least be open to transformation.

To conclude, I want to briefly return to Isaiah's vision of peaceful unity. We are given these prophetic images as a goal; as an ideal and something to work towards as well as a vision of life in the Kingdom. Here's a thing; if we are not interested in striving for the vision now, why would we be interested in participating in it in the age to come.

Jesus has given his Church authority to heal and it is good to take this authority seriously.

Including people into the life of the church brings healing. When functioning optimally the Church can act to restore a person spiritually, psychologically, emotionally and physically – and fundamentally - restore a person’s relationship with God. This is certainly something to work towards and it is not dependent on the size of a church, or on its churchmanship, but on the closeness of its people to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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