

## MINISTRY OF HEALING: 2<sup>nd</sup> of EPIPHANY 2012

There is a contrast in the two encounters between Jesus and new disciples described in this morning's gospel. Jesus simply finds Philip, and says to him 'Follow me'. Nathanael, on the other hand, is taken by Philip to see Jesus, who in a rather mysterious way sees into Nathanael...here is an Israelite indeed in whom is no deceit. Nathanael is taken by surprise; how did you know me? Where did you come to know me? he says. Jesus, we might say, knows Nathanael better than this new disciple knows himself. The Call of Jesus is expressed and experienced in all sorts of different ways. Some, it seems, like Philip, are found and summoned in a simple and direct way. Follow me...life-changing words. For some, there is a more drawn-out process: question and answer, a dawning and gradual realisation, a sense of being known by one who sees deeply into our hearts and minds. But whatever the origin of the call, there is the promise of a fuller and a final vision: you shall see greater things than these: you shall see in Jesus the reality of contact between earth and heaven...just as Samuel came to realise that the voice of God was to be heard in the ordinariness of the place where he lay down to sleep. The whole season of Christmas and Epiphany is about the meeting of heaven and earth...the transcendent glory and the immediate, material presence, Jesus manifested as God and Man.

And that is ultimate healing. When there's talk of the Church's ministry of healing, it's perhaps not surprising that people think about physical or mental illness, and whether the sick are going to get better, or be cured. But it might be better to start with Jesus as the point of contact between heaven and earth. To discover Jesus as the one who brings the divine nature into the human, and who draws the human into the perfection of God...that is to be made whole. To know the length, breadth, height and depth of the love of Jesus: that is healing for broken humanity; and it is a healing which he continues to offer us. There are many manifestations of this loving and healing presence: the Sacrament of Baptism, in which we are joined to the family of God and celebrate His love and care for us; the Sacrament of Reconciliation, so much neglected even by Christians who call themselves Catholics. 'Go in peace, the Lord has put away your sin'; that is indeed a word of healing...this is the embrace of the Father welcoming back the prodigal after years of disordered living, the gift of the healing power of Jesus, and that peace which he alone can give: the Sacrament of the Eucharist in which we are not only strengthened and supported by Jesus, but united with Him, re-made as members of His Body.

I mention these things before saying something about other particular forms of the ministry of healing, laying-on of hands and anointing with prayer, because it's so easy to have an unbalanced view about this. Yes, in his time, and as someone who saw deeply into the whole being, mental and physical, of the people of his day, Jesus performed what we call miracles of healing. But in the end, the good news was that men and women should encounter Him as the expression of God's love...revealed sometimes in physical or mental healing, but not always and not entirely so. So it is not the business of the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to drum up emotional fervour about the possibility of extraordinary acts of healing; rather, it is to draw people gently into the loving presence of Jesus, to discover that he offers that peace which is a profound experience of relationship with Our Father. I've already said that one of the ways in which the Church, through her priests, may do this is through the giving of absolution within the Sacrament of Reconciliation; but there are also the outward and visible,

physical means: touch, through laying-on of hands, and anointing with holy oil. We are, after all, whole beings...body affects mind, mind affects body. A simple touch, pressure of hand on hand, may bring deep comfort to one distressed. The laying-on of hands was one of the ways in which Jesus here on earth expressed His love; no less now, in his church, is it a sign of his love, the comfort, or strengthening of His Spirit. Oil was a symbol of healing in the days of Christ on earth; it is no less a symbol of his loving presence now. The advertisers and the beauty shops and parlours promoting oils and creams know this; but the Church has known it too, for centuries. But at times the Church has neglected these simple aspects of healing ministry, the use of oil, and physical actions which make real the loving presence of Jesus...actions which are of particular significance at times of anxiety, such as the wait for an operation, or the results of tests, at times of pain, whether physical or emotional: as we face the burdens and constraints of old age or disability...and in the hour of death. Anointing, let us remember, is a sign of life, that fullness of life with Jesus Christ which may be ours whatever the circumstances which we face. His Spirit is with us, a real presence, in sickness and frailty, as well as in health and strength.

Laying-on of hands and anointing with prayer: these are the simple, outward, sacramental signs which will be offered in the context of a weekday Mass here once a month, beginning this coming Wednesday. A simple explanation and reflection will be offered each time; there is no compulsion on those present at the Mass to receive this ministry, but I'm sure that it's true that we all stand in need of a deeper sense of Christ's healing presence, to discover how through his love, we find heaven joined with earth, the earth of our human reality with its pains and anxieties...also we may receive this ministry for another, since prayer binds us to others through the loving action of the Spirit, coming, as St Paul says, to the aid of our weakness in prayer. It is our prayer now that both those who, like Philip, hear the call of Jesus for themselves, and those who, like Nathanael, are brought to him by another (and it may indeed be our prayer which brings another to Jesus), will find through this ministry, that Jesus is present to them in compassion and love, bringing the fullness of divine love to our earth.