

***Observing St Luke
St George's Malvern
15 October 2017***

This week Christians celebrate and remember St Luke, Evangelist and Martyr, sometimes called St Luke the physician.

In the second reading this morning (2 Timothy 4.9-17a) Luke is named as one of Paul's companions – so he belongs to the group of followers of Jesus at that early stage. He is the only non-Jewish writer in the New Testament, and his two books – the gospel which bears his name and the Acts of the Apostles set out his clear teaching about the life and ministry of Christ showing us that God is the source of healing for every person – healing of body, mind and spirit. These days when we think of healing we usually think about physical illnesses – but Luke gives us a much more comprehensive understanding of God's healing power.

Early in my ministry I had a powerful experience of this. In the parish where I served my first curacy, 1973 the wife of the curate who was there before me had given birth to their first child. She had then been diagnosed with a fast-growing cancer and she died quite soon after her diagnosis. He left the parish and I was appointed. I arrived to find the parish community deeply grieving and also divided. Half of them were saying "She had this awful cancer – we prayed and prayed but she died – so God failed to hear our prayers." The other half were saying "She had this awful cancer – we prayed and prayed and she had the most wonderful journey to the end of her physical life. God certainly answered our prayers."

And the mystery of that experience has been something I have pondered over and over in the years since. I am glad to live in this time in history when we have such medical skill and knowledge available to us – anaesthetics, vaccinations, open heart surgery, organ transplants, cancer treatments, pacemakers, and so much else.

And we have many other issues to be thinking about too – in this state of Victoria at present the question of dying is before us – we often prolong life because we can, but how do we determine when is the right time to die? Also, we are aware of the lack of resources to treat common illnesses in developing countries where the death toll is high, and the cost of providing human skills, hospitals and equipment beyond reach for so many.

Christian faith invites us to see healing in a much broader context and the writing of Luke particularly focus this for us. Jesus' ministry with people shows his abiding concern for healing aspects of our lives more than our physical illnesses. He heals relationships, emotions, memories, attitudes and ways of thinking, he deals with grief and guilt, fear and all the impacts of our wrong choices. In short, God's healing is for our whole being. Healing a physical symptom is not much help if we ignore the deeper cause of our condition. Remember the paralyzed man who asks Jesus to heal him – Jesus announces the forgiveness of his sin and his physical healing follows.

Early Christianity used to speak of "the cure of souls" as a way of describing this all-embracing healing work of God through Christ. I think we have lost a lot as we have moved to modern

language of pastoral care. The idea of “cure of souls” is another way of describing the all-embracing healing work of God through Christ in each of us. We look to medication, surgery, and therapies of various kinds for healing. And there is also prayer, the sacraments including regular receiving of Holy Communion and fellowship with Christian friends. God’s healing is at work in us in all these ways.

In this morning’s Gospel reading (Luke 10.1-9) Dr Luke sets out how he sees healing working. Jesus sends out 70 disciples to go ahead of him. They are to be peace with everyone they meet, they are to gratefully receive hospitality as it is offered to them, they are to cure the sick and they are to witness to the presence of God at work in everyone. This is primarily about relationships, friendships and kindness shown to everyone they meet. It is by our presence that God’s healing is made available to others – just as much as by our actions. That is what the life and work of Jesus shows – and now it is at work in us the Body of Christ in our time and place. Jesus gave his “flesh” for the life of the world. Now we who eat his flesh and drink his blood become his healing presence to those we meet. In this passage Jesus gives us his “tips for the road” and they are very interpersonal. They are based on putting people in touch with people. Person-to-person was the way the gospel was originally communicated. Person-in-love-with-person, person-respecting-person, person-forgiving-person, person-crying-with-person, person-hugging-person: that’s where the healing Spirit of Christ is so powerfully present.

So today as Dr Luke bids us reflect more deeply on the mystery of God’s healing work in us we have two things to take away for our further reflection:

Firstly, those areas in our lives where we need healing. Make up your mind to bring whatever it is for you at present to the altar rails here every time you come – this is where your need is touched by God’s healing love. Every Eucharist is a healing Eucharist – every time is where our need is met by God’s healing action.

Then secondly, as you grow in the reality of God’s healing at work in you, you find yourself sent out as the gospel says to be a healer of others. Think about a person you love and what their current need might be – pray that God will send you to that person with the right words of healing for them. Try it – it works.

We can worry endlessly about what is happening with the decline of the church; we can devise clever programs of all kinds, we can seek to be relevant in whatever way we want. We can adopt fresh expressions of worship and church life – so far none of it seems to be working. What will work is for each of us to give ourselves to being healed and being healers – not just focussed on fixing physical symptoms but being open to widest work of Christ the healer in us.

So today we hear Luke encourage us to take this good news to heart for ourselves and for others – it will turn out that it is all we need to do.