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Soul Care in the Ministry of Jesus (II)

GEORGE JOHNSTON

IN a former article (*C.J.T.*, October, 1959) it was said that Jesus is the true exemplar of the pastoral ministry, and his work as a teaching preacher was considered. The present article will deal with *his healing activity* and with *his proclamation of the forgiveness of sins*.

It is remarkable that in the Marcan account healings take place in the Galilean ministry, with the exception of one exorcism after the Transfiguration (9:14ff.) and the cure of Bartimaeus (10:46-52). This may be due to the fact that Mark reproduces in the main the traditions of *northern* Palestine or the Galilean churches. Matthew adds nothing of significance other than the Jerusalem reference in 21:14 ("And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them"). Luke adds no exorcisms, but contributes the stories of five additional healings, none of which need be later than the Galilean period, although the incident of ten lepers cleansed belongs to the very end of the time when he was "on the way to Jerusalem . . . passing along between Samaria and Galilee" (Luke 17:11). The balance in this, as in other aspects of the mission of Jesus, may be provided by the Fourth Gospel where we read that "many believed in his name when they saw his signs which he did" in Jerusalem at the Passover season (John 2:23). Three healings are recorded of Jerusalem, or of Bethany which is not far distant: the paralytic of Bethzatha (or Bethesda), the blind man who was sent to Siloam, and the raising of Lazarus (John 5:2ff.; 9:1ff.; 11:1ff.). Again this may be due to the fact that John reproduces in the main the traditions of *southern* Palestine or the Judean churches (cf. Gal. 1:22). One important difference, however, is that the arrest of Jesus in John's Gospel was precipitated by the resurrection of Lazarus, rather than by the Temple Cleansing as in Mark. It is extremely difficult to accept the Lazarus story as historical.

It would seem that Jesus performed most of the healings and exorcisms, then, in the earlier part of his ministry, and this may mean that they were not in themselves of the first priority for his work. He shrank from magic of any sort, whether as food-dispenser or physician. According to Mark he refused to go out of his way to do miracles. John rather shows the miracles as "signs of his glory," the glory of the incarnate *Logos*, in keeping with the theological interpretation that governs his entire book. But Mark is probably to be preferred to John at this point. On the other hand, it would be unjustified scepticism if one were to reject the historicity of the healings and exorcisms. For the earliest traditions, preserved in Acts, tell a consistent story: Jesus was a man attested by mighty works and wonders and signs

(2:22); he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the Devil (10:38; cf. Hebs. 2:14f.). Acts records similar stories about Peter and Paul also, who healed "in the Name of Jesus"; and Paul authenticates his own apostolic office by the "signs and wonders and mighty works" he had performed at Corinth (2 Cor. 12:12). Thus was fulfilled the word of John 14:12: "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father." The apostolic church had been commissioned to heal.

Before the relevance of this for the modern ministry is further explored, something more should be said about the exorcisms and healings performed by Jesus.

Quite general reference to the driving out of demons and to healing is found in Mark 1:32-34; 6:5; Matt. 4:23f.; 9:35; 14:35f.; 15:30f.; Luke 7:21-23; 8:2 (and cf. 11:24-26). Sometimes an exorcism is linked with a healing: Matt. 9:32; 12:22, blindness and dumbness. It is not known what evil spirit afflicted the Syrophenician's daughter (Mark 7:24-30), but for a miracle done at a distance one may compare the centurion's slave (Luke 7:2-10) and the nobleman's son (John 4:46-54, which may be a doublet of the preceding). No definition is given of "unclean spirits" (Mark 1:23ff.), though it may be conjectured that they included temper tantrums, emotion-charged obscenities, blasphemy, sexual exhibitionism, and the like. The word "spirit" can be used in Hebrew as a psychological term to denote characteristics of the personality (frequently so in the Qumran Scrolls, for example). Invasion of the self by a demon was the current "explanation," but not necessarily the correct one. Jesus, however, appears to have accepted the usual interpretation.

Two interesting cases remain: the Gerasene or Gadarene demoniac called Legion, and the epileptic (?) boy (Mark 5:2ff.; 9:14ff.). The convulsions and shouting of the stories can be paralleled from modern hospital cases. Legion may be, as Leslie Weatherhead has suggested, an example of "multiple personality" or some form of schizophrenia; and the name "Legion" may have derived from some dreadful traumatic experience connected with the soldiers of a Roman legion. In this way psychology sheds light on these very interesting accounts. To say this does not mean, of course, that the actuality of the cures is called into question nor that their dependence on quite remarkable and divine powers in Jesus is denied.

On the contrary, it becomes evident that there is need for "exorcism" still, although the methods of today will largely be dependent on psychological advances and on medicine, as well as on religious faith in God the Healer. The pastor may or may not have the equipment to deal with difficult cases of personality maladjustment and forms of insanity; indeed he must be protected from practising what he has no special skill to do. In many congregations, no doubt, there are people who suffer mental sicknesses, some of which can be recognised and helped by the minister or by the minister working in a team with a doctor and a psychotherapist. Others may be

noted by the minister (for example, the beginnings of schizophrenia), but the proper treatment has to be given in a mental hospital by specialists. Opinions differ concerning the value of ceremonies of exorcism performed in the ritual of the Church; they should be treated with the utmost circumspection.

The healings of Jesus have been carefully examined also and modern parallels suggested. Peter's mother-in-law may have had a "fever" due to excitement or a minor upset. "Leprosy" was probably a form of skin disease, dermatitis, eczema or psoriasis, which is sometimes psychosomatic in origin. Paralysis can be caused by a deep-rooted conflict and cures by suggestion are possible. It is not necessary in this paper to offer explanations for them all, and certainly not to "rationalise" the cures away. The Gospels regard the healing miracles as proof of God's Kingdom of love exercising its powers through the Messiah to bless people, and the promise of this was found in Isa. 29:18f.; 35:5f.; 61:1; cf. Luke 7:21-23. As time passed, legends naturally accumulated around Jesus, but there is a minimum of this in the canonical Gospels. It may be left an open question whether Jesus ever raised quite dead people to life; nevertheless there can be no doubt that Jesus did perform cures, did restore greatly disturbed men and women to sanity, did cast out "evil spirits." As to the existence of demons or the Prince of demons Miss Graham Ikin has written that "*some perversion on a spiritual plane with a cosmic repercussion may require corporate activity to break through. The individual alone cannot counteract it.*" Thus more than human evil may be involved.¹

More germane to our present purpose is the method employed by Jesus in the cure of disease.

Pity or compassion dominated his approach to sufferers (Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13), and this quality is surely a *sine qua non* for the minister as pastor. On the side of the patient or the patient's friends there had to be faith, confidence in Jesus (Mark 2:5; Luke 17:13); and this was almost certainly required in every case of genuine healing.

The touch of Jesus in the stories of the deaf mute and the blind man (Mark 7:32-37; 8: 22-26) has been interpreted as a magical action, but it is better to take it as a necessary expression of Jesus' immediate personal contact with the sick.

In John's Gospel the initiative of Jesus and the need for the patient's desire to be cured are given considerable stress. To the paralytic of Beth-zatha Jesus said, "Do you want to be healed?" It was Jesus who saw the man blind from birth and proceeded to cure him, partly at least by requiring obedience from him: "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (9:7). This is not quite the impression that Mark gives. Jesus there seems to avoid the wonder-working method on principle, presumably because it was wide open to misunderstanding. Still, it must be remembered that the people of the time who looked for the coming of the Kingdom of God with power expected the

1. *New Concepts of Healing*, p. 17.

healing of disease, fertility in the land, and paradise restored with all its blessings (cf. 1 Enoch 10:7; 67:8; 95:4; Test. of Dan 5:12; Test. of Levi 18:10f.). Sometimes the healings are connected with the power of the Spirit; and it is to be noted that the Evangelists always connect the messianic work of Jesus with his endowment with the Holy Spirit. We ought to regard the healings, therefore, as the overcoming of lesser spirits by the divine which was uniquely present in Jesus and was promised to his disciples. In Mark 6:7 Jesus sent out the Twelve "and gave them authority over the unclean spirits." This can mean only that he made them partners in a gift of the Holy Spirit by whose power they were to drive out the unholy spirits (cf. Mark 3:21-30 for this same power at work in Jesus himself).

From these examples one should deduce that pastors who seek to perform healings in the service of God must humbly seek from on high the graces and power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, in his valuable study of the healing ministry in relation to psychology and religion, pays special attention to Jesus' use of suggestion; and doubtless this is at bottom an application of the healer's faith to the patient's need. (On the other hand, cures do not always follow nor endure, even if confidence is present in both parties to a healing act.) The discussion by Weatherhead of the Gadarene demoniac is particularly deserving of study. He underlines the patience of Jesus and his readiness to try more than one method. We have to notice that Jesus asks the man his name, implying perhaps an unspoken request that he should trust Jesus. Is this also an example of the magical use of the "name"? Probably not; Jesus was personally interested in the man, and the early Fathers (for example, Ignatius of Antioch) rightly drew from the usage a pastoral principle: "Know the people of your congregation by name."

The healing ministry illustrates the basic purpose of Jesus. He had come to seek and to save the lost, the troubled, and the spiritually listless (Mark 2:17; 10:45; Luke 19:10; John 10:10). Sinful men are described as "sick" souls, without implying that ill-health is due to sin (cf. John 9:3). Apparently Jesus never wasted time on theoretical arguments about the origin of sickness when there was healing work to be done—a fact that conceals lessons for those who would rather analyse and construct theories than enter the fray and get things done. "Today we overrate the rational values and behave as if thinking were a substitute for living. We have forgotten that thought and intuition that feeds it only become whole if the deed grows out of it as fruit grows from the pollen on a tree. So everywhere in our civilized world there tends to be a terrible cleavage between thinking and doing."² Jesus put his mind to accomplishing the work God had given him to do (John 4:34), and he expects similar obedience from his servants (Mark 9:35; 10:43f.; Luke 6:40).

One must also consider from this evidence the relation between health and salvation as Jesus understood it. Of late it has often been laid down as

2. Laurens van der Post, *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, p. 61.

an axiom that sickness is contrary to the will of God, and that its cure belongs essentially with redemption. A spirit set right with God should have a body made whole and well. It is difficult to substantiate this thesis in its entirety from the work of Jesus. One would have expected him to have directed an incessant campaign against ill-health as part of his programme, if he had really believed so. In fact, some healings happened almost incidentally; he was reluctant to perform a cure outside of the holy land of Israel; and soon he seems to have had no time at all for them. It is probably correct to say that good health is what men should enjoy who live according to the divine will; but we have to be cautious in concluding that bringing sinners into a redeemed relationship with God will also produce a healthy future. There have been many saints who were healthy neither in the physical nor in the psychological sense.

Ralph Morton makes the interesting suggestion that, once he took the road to the Cross, Jesus turned from individuals to national and political issues. "Previously, in Galilee, He had dealt with men and women in their personal needs and problems. Much of His time was given to the healing of the sick and to talking with individuals. Now . . . His time is given to public matters and men's questions on them. . . . In place of personal conversation there is public debate. . . . Jesus was taking a line that was as new as it was definite."³ We may say that Jesus was adaptable to circumstance, not one whose programme was inflexible; or better, that in the midst of a changing situation he discerned the will of God and obeyed it.

A dramatic healing story will serve as the bridge that carries our discussion to the third and last element in the pastoral ministry of Jesus, namely the forgiveness of sins.

In Mark 2:3-12 a paralytic borne by four friends was lowered from a roof to the feet of Jesus, whose response to a great act of faith was to say, "My son (or, child), your sins are forgiven." The legalists in the crowd were horrified at such blasphemy. Yet this was surely the proper work of the Son: to invite sinners to return to God the Father, to narrate immortal parables like that of the sinful Prodigal and the still more sinful Elder Brother. And is it not equally reasonable that, as related in John 20, the victorious Lord should commission his Church, represented by the disciples of the Upper Room, to declare and to withhold the forgiveness of sins? James 5:13-16 connects sickness, confession of sin to one another, prayer, and pardon in a way that agrees with the teaching, method, and mandate of Jesus. One may compare also I John 5:14-17 where it is allowed that Christians (not just the clergy!) may intercede for the forgiveness of their brethren.

This has far-reaching implications. For one thing it gives a basis for the pastoral director acting as "priest" to absolve the troubled, guilty people who come to him in godly sorrow. He will act never in his own name but always in the Name of Christ, with the humility of one who is himself

3. *The Twelve Together*, p. 105.

a pardoned sinner and the authority of one consecrated to be the agent of the Holy Spirit. Christ is, naturally, the final authority, the Bishop of the ministers as well as the people (cf. 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4). Nothing in all this need arrogate from God his proper functions, since we believe that the commission to proclaim the Gospel of forgiveness and judgment comes graciously from God himself. 1 Cor. 5:3-5 and 2 Cor. 2:6-11 show this authority at work in the primitive Church. On the other hand, the lessons of the Middle Ages demonstrate how easily men may turn their ministry of absolution into a tyranny and a mockery, and it must always be subject to the corporate mind of the whole Church acting through congregational and similar assemblies. Every word that Jesus said about forgiving as we hope to be forgiven is relevant here.

Another matter of significance is that Jesus not only spoke with sinners; he ate and drank with them to the surprise of the self-righteous (Mark 2:15-17; John 4:7ff.). It may be that some pastors in highly organized churches today find it virtually impossible to go outside in order to mingle with those who do not "belong." If so, some re-examination of the priorities seems to be called for.

Again, we note that the disciples could not cure the epileptic boy (Mark 9:18), but Jesus proved his mastery. "This kind," he told his troubled men, "cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." To emulate Christ in his pastoral work demands emulation of his prayer life, his wise withdrawals from the busy world into solitude, his constant self-discipline. "No exponent of religion can help here if his own attitude is infantile or immature."⁴

To sum up: Jesus is the pattern of pastoral service who came to fulfil the Father's loving will, and in so doing he gave his very life. Ministers too are to be regarded as "expendable" in the work of the Kingdom, as the late Dean Tertius van Dyke of Hartford, Connecticut, once said to the writer. As the Master dealt gently with the Samaritans and other "outsiders," as God is no respecter of persons, so the followers must learn to avoid so far as possible prejudice and favouritism; though ministers well realize that human likes and dislikes too easily corrupt their dealings with the congregation. The allegory of the Good Shepherd suggests that the shepherd leads, the flock follows; but in our experience "leadership" comes to mean something incompatible with service, and the pastoral office always involves hard work. To provide for the people what they want may win a cheap popularity and a comfortable living, but this will not produce men and women with whom God can be well pleased. Only by letting God come first, by seeking first his Kingdom and its righteousness as Jesus himself did, is it possible to be sustained in the ministry; for everything needful will be added. And only so will the souls of men be cured as they mirror the perfections of Christ.

4. A. Graham Ikin, *op. cit.*, p. 10.