

*Your good health. Slainte. Salut. Santé. Zum Wohl. Salute. Even the most secular of us raise a glass to make our toasts in a vestige of ancient sacrificial libations - blood or water offered to the gods in a prayer for health and 'long life!'. But we elevate the Cup of Salvation not just to join with Christ's prayer and libation for the life of the world, not just to drink deep of the abundant life offered to us, but to acknowledge that our life, our health is found in being poured out like a drink offering.*

"I always take Scotch whiskey at night, " said Mark Twain, "as a preventive of toothache. I have never had the toothache; and, I never intend to have it."

On this Festival of the Patron Saint of Brewers and Physicians, it is worth beginning by observing that people have some pretty rum ideas about what is good for you. It's not without reason that the phrase 'for medicinal purposes' tends to produce more suspicion than sympathy, although the substance it most regularly refers to can at least lay claim to some benefits, when "consumed in moderation" - even if it is more reasonably mixed *with* tonic, than taken *as* one.

Across the centuries, however, all manner of genuinely *toxic* substances have been prescribed as cures, from heroin cough syrups to sulphuric acid skin creams. And the fact that medical opinion can vary so widely across cultures, and change so dramatically over time, is symptomatic of a problem endemic to human health:

We can, slowly but surely, establish a list of things that are, in varying degrees, bad for us; but working out what reliably leads to greater wholeness is much more difficult. Prevention may be better than cure, but as Mark Twain's prescription demonstrates, it is far harder to prove, and we've yet to develop a device we can pop under our tongue to measure how well we are. So, people often complain that western medicine is more about managing sickness than promoting well- being, but the truth is health is a boundary condition - a state with hard to define borders - through which we are always travelling, and in which we are never at home...

And this is where the Feast of the Physician Evangelist St Luke, the wholesome medicine of the doctrine delivered by him, and the ongoing cure of our souls that all of Trinity Season represents are bound together\* in the text of our Gospel: in the sending of the 70 like sheep among wolves, and in the cryptic but familiar statement about fields white to harvest.

It would probably not be overstating the case to say that health is the central preoccupation of the Christian faith. It is a fact easily lost in language, or obscured by particular theologies, but the goal to which the whole New Testament points is well summed up by the Greek word 'sozo' and its cognates - a verb, used more by Luke than all the other evangelists, meaning to make well or whole, and most often translated as to save - as in My Spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour or He hath raised up a mighty salvation for us. Or My eyes have seen thy salvation. Like the more recently popular English word - holistic - the salvation sozo describes is, especially in Luke's hands, a global movement towards the wholeness of persons, societies, nations and ecosystems.

But of course, as the very term 'whole' suggests, it is holding all these threads harmoniously *together* that makes the question of wellness such a complex one, and that makes the prescribing (and taking) of the right **medicine**, such a precarious business.

So how exactly do we partake in what St Ignatius of Antioch might call the medicine of immortality? How are we moved from the place where there is no health in us, to a participation in that heavenly reality where the leaves of the trees are available in season and out for the healing of the nations?

The answer the Good Doctor offers in his script, is by dose after dose of metanoia - that complete change in how we view the world which Fr George was emphasising last week:

The trouble with health, like wealth, or peace is that we *tend* to think of it as a commodity - something we can own and lose. Or as a location - somewhere to seek, and occupy and defend. But conceived of in this way wholeness is like quicksilver forever slipping through our fingers. The message of the Gospel is that salvation - health- is not located in "this present world" at all, even though we can share in it here, that it is not a thing to be grasped, but a life to be inhabited by joining in with its eternal outpouring.

In the preceding chapter of Luke's Gospel, Jesus has just been demonstrating this principle by first feeding the 5000 through the breaking and sharing of bread, and then explaining that his own life is to be broken and shared, and that his disciples are in turn to participate in that process, as fully as they participated in the miracle of the loaves and fish.

Now in Chapter 10, the point is being driven home.

The principal that is at the heart of the Good News and of true Good Health. The principle of Abundance. Of tapping into a supply that is endlessly overflowing...by which even in the most arid conditions, waters break out; even in the valley of the shadow of death, *our* cup runneth over...

In August 2013 social scientists Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir published a comprehensive, and groundbreaking, study of the polar opposite of Abundance: entitled, "Scarcity. Why Having Too Little Means So Much". Their thesis is that scarcity - the subjective sense of having more needs than resources - continually captures our minds, causing us to function constantly out of fear, in ways harmful to self and society, and leaving us diminished in three very particular things:

Fluidity of thought.

Breadth of vision.

And Impulse control.

I'm convinced St Luke would agree with their diagnosis because the 3 areas they identify relate directly to essential elements of Christian discipleship, of health as the Gospel presents it. And the beginning of their treatment is in the refrain that begins his account of salvation. Fear not.

If you believe as the New Testament seems to teach, that in no longer being under the law, our moral decision making cannot simply resort to hard and fast rules applied unwaveringly to each circumstance - if we cannot as Christians simply stone this woman, for example, because she was caught in adultery, and that's what the law says to do - If you believe that the law is no longer lifeless letters that increase sin and result in death, but a living Lord leading us to liberty and a righteous life, then fluidity of thinking is essential. But a fearful sense of scarcity constantly undermines it.

If you believe that the core message of the New Testament is one of hope - of a deliberately cultivated focus on that which lies ahead, not just that which is most immediately to hand or absent. And of ever widening reconciliation - of refusing the narrow parameters of current peaceable relations, to reach out continually to those in enmity, as peacemakers, then breadth of vision is fundamental. But a fearful sense of scarcity continually constricts it.

If you believe that the call of the New Testament is to a lifestyle which refuses to be ruled by instinct - by the desire to possess, by the urge to promote our own genetic advantage, by the need to protect the self at all costs - but which instead insists on generosity, on self-sacrifice and love and forgiveness even in the face of hostility, then self-control is a basic necessity. But a fearful sense of scarcity steadily corrodes it.

It is not for nothing that the fruits of the spirit are listed as including kindness and goodness, patience, and self-control...But these are the fruits of a tree rooted in abundance, in endless and unlimited life and love - that flowers in peace and joy, and overflows into acts of patience, into choices based on a new instinct to control self and prefer others - against which there is neither law nor limit.

It is this principle of abundance we find in Luke's account of the 70 disciples, and in the story it surely alludes to. In Numbers 11 the spirit falls upon the 70 elders called to the Tent of Meeting, *and* on two elders who had not gone up, but remained in the camp. When Moses' servants rush to warn him the spirit has overspilled its bounds, as if in not being contained it risked running dry, Moses effectively rebukes their lack of faith. "I wish that this was happening to all God's people," because the only limit on this abundance is the scarcity of vessels to be filled by it...

It is not clear in that story whether there were 70 or 72 elders, and the manuscripts of *this* story in the gospel are similarly ambiguous as to whether there were 70 or 72 sent out, but what *is* clear to my mind is that Luke wants this *sending* out to be understood as of a piece with that abundant *pouring* out, as with the miracles of chapters 8 & 9, because at every point in his gospel where it seems all resources have run dry, he demands faith that there is the eternal life already overflowing.

And this is Jesus' good news to poor - to all in the grip of scarcity - embodied in the feeding of 5000 with nothing like enough; instilled in the 70 by sending them out with nothing at all - no purse, no scribe, no shoes...(then asking them in Luke 22 "Did you lack any thing?"). This is the good news articulated in the repeated motif: the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.

**The good news that the time of scarcity is already over. That there is no longer any need for fear of scarcity to colonise and captivate our minds.**

**The problem for us, is that this notion is as far from our experience or perception of reality, as the notion that they had enough food for everyone, was from the perception or experience of the disciples in the wilderness, or from those being sent out empty handed.**

**When we consider the time available to us, we know we do not have enough. We do not have enough even for our own families. So we dare not interrupt our busy days to help the man lying at the side of the road.**

**When we consider our finances, we know we do not have enough, sometimes just to make ends meet, so we do not lavish our generosity even on those who deserve it, let alone those who might waste it.**

**When we consider our peace and security, we know that it is horribly limited, precariously finite, so we dare not cease firing on those who threaten us, or lower our defences to care for the plague victim or the leper or the refugee. We dare not be the lamb striding purposefully into the pack of wolves.**

**We act continually from an awareness of scarcity, without ever being aware that we are doing so. And so too often we are more frightened than liberated by the example of Christ, who continually gave away his time, his resources, his very self - who didn't just share something of what he had spare - or admonish us to do the same. But gave away everything, and calls us to do likewise.**

**But what becomes more and more apparent as you contemplate the gospel of Luke, or the gospels at all - when you think about expressions like I have food to eat you know not of, or the fields are white unto harvest, is that he gave everything away out of an overwhelming, and all-pervading sense of abundance.**

**Because despite the newly finite constraints of his humanity, he knew his bodily life, his material gifts, his time on earth to be the fruit of a tree whose roots are in the eternal and the infinite: fruits of the love of the Father for the Son in the Spirit.**

**The outrageous liberty and liberality of the Gospel stems not from any merely stoic ability to endure or understand suffering, nor from any merely Platonic sense that the stuff of life is less than real, and less highly to be valued than some distant ideal, but from faith - from knowing - in the deepest centre of our being - that every good and perfect gift comes from the self-giving love of God, is the fruit of the tree of crucifixion; from knowing in the marrow of our bones that as that fruit is freely given away, not only does the sap continue to course through the vines branches, but in the act of giving the life of the vine is not used up but propagated; from coming finally to know that health is found only in drinking deep of the cup of salvation as we pour our lives out upon the altar.**

The people who have even begun by God's grace to grasp this - are people who do not count their pennies or guard their time or withhold their forgiveness when they are asked of them, because they know these are all tokens of something that is not diminished in their spending, but limitlessly increased. These are people who have understood, that before they were slaves in a system of scarcity and ever diminishing returns, and now they are free, by virtue of their unbreakable connection in Christ to the source of grace which abounds to eternal life. These are people who are not trying to hold on to health or protect it but who are becoming more whole by being broken and shared...

People we might call saints. And the only thing that distinguishes us from them, is that they are already living the life we have already received, they are already garnering the harvest we are still inexplicably waiting for, they have partaken of the same medicine of immortality as us, but they have finished the course. Now they counsel us: Fear not. Pour yourselves out and drink deep of love's abundance. The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers... And that we might even now number ourselves amongst them...