

# Homily for the Feast of St Luke the Evangelist

*A sermon preached in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, Pusey House, Oxford, at the Sung Mass for the Feast of St Luke the Evangelist on Wednesday 18 October 2023, by Dr Birte Feix, Consultant in Neuroanaesthesia and Critical Care*

2 TIMOTHY 4.5-15; ST. LUKE 10.1-9

“And heal the sick that are therein, and say unto them, The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you” ST. LUKE 10.9

*May I speak in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

**T**ODAY, the Church remembers St Luke the Evangelist, companion and co-worker of St Paul. He is described in the letter to the Colossians as ‘the beloved physician’, and is thus the patron saint of physicians, amongst others.

I would like to reflect on healing and cure, a prevalent theme throughout the Gospels and a task set before the seventy in their mission in today’s gospel reading. But what do we actually mean by healing, and what should our response be to the commission of Jesus’ disciples to heal the sick?

The World Health Organisation defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity. So, does modern medicine provide healing in the sense of restoration to health? Yes, sometimes it does, but often it does not; in fact, especially in my field of intensive care medicine, even the boundaries between life and death can be blurred, our interventions can both be a blessing and a curse. Life is more than the existence of a breathing body with a beating heart; it involves consciousness and an awareness of one’s surroundings and an ability to interact with them by whatever means available to that person.

The ethics of clinical decision making sometimes come under public scrutiny, and rightly so, especially in particularly emotive cases, and, on occasion, doctors are accused of ‘playing God’. So should we preserve life as in bodily survival at all costs, even when there is no hope of a meaningful recovery, with treatments that involve tubes, lines, machines, are burdensome and in some way could almost be described as torture?

Should we make a person survive in a minimally conscious state? Or should we recall our Hippocratic Oath of 'first do no harm' and know when to stop and let someone die with dignity and use our skills to alleviate symptoms of suffering such as pain and anxiety, accepting the doctrine of double effect in what we do here?

What is a Christian response to these bewildering scenarios?

Can healing as a complete restoration to health always be the goal, and must it always be our hope? Not always, as Christ does not save us from death, but transforms death so that it becomes a door to the eternal life and to our salvation.

What are we to make of the healing miracles in this context? Those miracles are often Jesus' response to expressions of faith, for example the sick of Gennesaret, the Syrophenician woman, or the blind man at Bethsaida in the Gospel according to St Mark. But who are these miracles for? Yes, of course, the sick are healed, and there is little doubting of Jesus' compassion for the ones suffering, but, more often than not, miracles could be regarded as signs performed that others, as well as those healed, may see and believe. And ultimately, all those who were healed will eventually die and the One who performed these mighty acts will end up on the Cross.

What about the most basic Christian response of prayer? Prayer has to be encouraged as one of our means of conversation with the Divine Love, a means of asking, of expressing our desires, but it becomes fraught with difficulties when prayer is intended as our means to bring about specific outcomes. I have seen so many times the distressing effects of praying for recovery itself in the face of overwhelming life-ending illness both on the family's grief, but also their faith and their relationship with their church. Not all prayer will be answered in the way we desire or hope for, so perhaps we should take the prayer of our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane as our example "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will but thine be done." (Luke 22.42).

These are impossibly difficult questions to inhabit faithfully and in such a way that the kingdom is brought nigh, but whenever our intellect, our reasoning, our ability to comprehend get stuck, we can turn to the Sacraments, tangible tools of our salvation or, according to the Dominican Herbert McCabe, expressions of faith for the interim period between Christ's resurrection and our resurrection.

In the context of healing, we may naturally consider the Sacrament of Anointing. But what is our expectation of reception of this Sacrament? It is a Sacrament conferring bodily strength and protection against evil, allowing us to share in the suffering of Christ, whatever the final outcome of the episode of illness for which we seek anointing. It can be seen as the consummation of our spiritual healing, a theme taken up by the Collect today which describes St Luke as the physician of the soul. But ultimately, all healing and unction are a preparation for death.

In the past, Anointing was often seen as the completion of the Sacrament of Penance. But perhaps we should take note that Jesus Himself broke the link between sin and illness, as can be seen in the cleansing of the leper and the healing of the paralytic in St Matthew's Gospel. Though it will often seem right to confess our sins in this context as well as receive Communion. In fact, Penance and Anointing have been described as the Sacraments of returning to the Eucharist.

But, above all, we have the Eucharist, the Sacrament Jesus Himself instituted in the Upper Room in the night that He was betrayed. It is the Sacrament of wholeness, of gathering into one the broken world and the brokenness of the individual. According to Cardinal Ratzinger, it is the Sacrament of our transformation, where sacrifice has become gift and we return to love and in worship are healed from our wounded freedom. The Eucharist is our food and strength for our earthly pilgrimage and hopefully, in the Viaticum, will provide comfort for our final journey.

So what about all of us here, including all who are well and not involved in the caring professions? Death is one of the very few certainties of life, and it is the Christian hope that death is not the final word. But how do we prepare for a good death? With St Luke, we are sent out "to endure afflictions [...] and make full proof of [our] ministry" (2 Timothy 4.5), and we may hope to aspire to the certainty of St Paul at the end of his life: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4.7). But let us never forget that the strength to do so comes from God and His Grace, and not our own strengths and achievements.

As we will soon approach the altar to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, let us take note of what the priest will shortly say in the invitation to confession and "let us draw near and take this Holy Sacrament to our comfort."

*Amen*

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