

Sermon – Paraclesis, Week 5: Healing - Luke 13. 10-17.

This week we come to the fifth of our sermons based on the concept of Paraclesis, coming alongside another person, especially when they're facing one of the many struggles that define the human condition.

Over the weeks we have looked at Caring, Loving, Journeying and, last week, Living.

Today we are looking at Healing, and it is healing that is central to our Gospel reading. Exactly why the woman whom Jesus heals is bent double we're not told. What Luke tells us is that she had a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. In Jesus' day it was common to attribute many disorders to evil spirits.

Today, of course, we reject that explanation and modern medical knowledge suggests that she was suffering from *ankylosing spondylitis*, in which the bones of her spine were rigidly fused together. But other translations of the Greek in our gospel put it slightly differently from the New Revised Standard Version which we listened to.

Both William Barclay and Tom Wright in their translations refer to her as suffering from a "spirit of weakness," and it has been suggested that the woman was suffering from *skoliosis hysterica*.

In other words, her condition was psychosomatic – physical symptoms caused psychologically. Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham, and one of our leading Biblical scholars, suggests that she might have been physically or mentally abused at some time in the past. He goes on to say, "Even after all the medical advances of the last few hundred years, we are very much aware that such things happen without any other apparent cause."

Certainly that is how Trevor Partridge, the creator of this Paraclesis course understands it. But rather than describe the woman's condition as psychological, he prefers to call it spiritual.

All of us may at times in our lives find ourselves in a dark or broken place. And it's then that we need the comfort of those around us. The word "comfort" literally means "with strength," and it is our calling as Christians to bring our strength to support our fellow Christians when they find themselves in a broken place.

As St Paul puts it in his first letter to the Thessalonians: "Therefore encourage (another word for "comfort"), encourage one another and build up each other." (1 Thessalonians 5.11) In other words, we are called to use our strength to build up, restore and repair our fellows, so that they can be rebuilt and move on with their lives from a position of strength, not weakness.

Before we go on, it's worth noting that once again Jesus risks healing on the Sabbath, as he did in last week's account of the healing at the Pool of Bethesda. Coming alongside people to comfort them can also bring with it the risk of rejection, but if we follow Jesus' example, we'll take the risk.

But back to our call to comfort those who find themselves in a broken place, which Paul reinforces in his letter to the church in Galatia: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6.3). By just “being there” and journeying with someone, we can help them find healing.

However, in journeying with someone we need to recognise that all behaviour has a cause and that what has brought our friend to a broken place is a wounded spirit.

So what are these broken places in which people find themselves?

Some may stem from childhood experiences, as may have been the case with the woman whom Jesus healed, if she had indeed suffered from physical and mental abuse earlier.

Certainly, experiences recorded on the psychoanalyst’s couch would suggest that there are many people suffering from what we might call “damaged child syndrome,” in which aberrant behaviour in the present is seen to be caused by repressed experiences in the past.

Others may find themselves in broken places with a more recent cause, such as a broken relationship. Such broken relationships may stem from the immediate family, or be within a marriage. Difficulties in our relationships can also arise at work or in the church community. But wherever they occur, broken relationships can very easily bring us down.

Broken dreams can also affect our spiritual wellbeing. Many of us may develop plans for the future which for one reason or another are not realised and leave us feeling deflated.

Hearts, too, can be broken, as a result of bereavement, a miscarriage, the infidelity of our marriage partner or childlessness.

More and more in the media we read of young people whose self-image has been so broken by bullying, social media abuse or some other form of rejection that they have contemplated or even committed suicide.

Long-term or severe illness and disability can produce a broken place which may go unnoticed by those around us.

So what comfort can we bring to those in a broken place?

The prophet Jeremiah writes of the Israelites that they have forsaken God, “the fountain of living water and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” (Jeremiah 2. 13) A cistern was a large tank cut into rock to hold water. After a while, the rock cracked and the water would drain away leaving only mud.

Trevor Partridge suggests that this is an image of what it is like when we try to satisfy our deepest longings, or mend our broken places, with anything other than God. Alternatives we might try such as retail therapy, a new car, or a world cruise, for example, are, in this context, little more than idolatry.

Rather, Partridge suggests, if we are to bring comfort to those in broken places, those with a wounded spirit, we need to come alongside them and help them work through these hurts in relation to, and in the light of God’s grace.

The importance of God's grace in helping us move on from those broken places is made very clear in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, where he writes:

A thorn was given to me in the flesh. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'

Paul accepted God's grace and so was able to claim:

Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinth. 12. 7 -10)

The very real risk is that if we don't accept God's grace, then we become bitter and we allow ourselves to become a victim of the broken place in which we find ourselves. And regarding ourselves as victims we begin to take out our bitterness on others. I'm sure that we've all come across those whose lives have become so bitter to them that they start to take it out on those around them.

And it may be that in coming alongside someone in a broken place, we will need to help them overcome their bitterness by accepting God's grace and choosing a path of forgiveness, for forgiveness is a key part of grace.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes: "Bear with one another and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." (Colossians 3.13)

But note that this is a two way process: each must forgive the other, both the one who brings the complaint and the one who is on the receiving end of it.

I mentioned earlier that forgiveness is a key part of God's grace. For it is forgiveness that gives us access to God's grace. It is only when we recognise our own need of forgiveness that God is able to release that grace to us. Paul in his letter to the Romans writes that "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Note that: all, not some, have sinned. All of us do things that separate us from God, but as St John writes in his first letter:

"If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1.9)

That forgiveness, that cleansing from unrighteousness, is not something that we can earn. It is God's free gift to us, his grace. And that same grace is available to those who find themselves in one of the broken places that we talked about earlier.

If you want to know where that grace is located, you have only to look to the cross for that is where Jesus gained for us our forgiveness and unlocked God's grace. But the cross also represents something else. In the prophet Isaiah we find this written of Jesus, the Messiah: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities." (Isaiah 53.5)

Trevor Partridge understands this to mean that through the cross, God not only saves us and forgives our sin, but He heals the wounded soul. And he goes on to say: "Jesus bore all life's trauma on our behalf; He paid the ultimate price for our freedom and healing."

So, Partridge concludes, if we come to Jesus, having dismantled those defence mechanisms that we use to protect ourselves when we find ourselves in a broken place, and let him, the wounded Healer, touch us, then we, in turn, can come alongside and journey with others, helping them dismantle their defences, so that God's healing can flow to them.

And this is paracelsus at work: coming alongside others with the comfort and strength of God, so making them strong when they find themselves in a broken place.

And finally.... All that I have said in relation to how we care for each other as a church family also applies to how we live in the world beyond our church walls.

The healing of the woman in our Gospel reading may have taken place within the walls of a synagogue, but elsewhere in his ministry, we find Jesus healing wherever he comes across the need for healing – even those detested by his fellow Jews, as, for example, the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman or the Roman centurion's servant.

So, in Trevor Partridge's words, "May we be a church that reaches beyond these four walls and into the brokenness of the streets around us – coming alongside people and leading them to the Healer, whose name is Jesus. Amen