

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
by the Reverend Alan Neale on Sunday December 2nd 2007
“The Church’s Ministry of Healing – Are you being saved?”**

Romans chapter thirteen, verse eleven: “Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed”.

Today, the first Sunday of Advent, is the beginning of the Church’s New Year.

Though it seems strange to many... we may and we should wish one another “Happy New Year”;

Though it seems strange to many... we try, with the help of God the Holy Spirit, to resist yanking Christmas music, Christmas decorations, Christmas greetings into this holy and sober season of Advent;

And, this Advent of 2007, though it seem strange to many (perhaps even some or many within the church) we will explore the Church’s Ministry of Healing.

Today begins a series of sermons on the Church’s Ministry of Healing – Part One “Are you being saved?”.

Dr. Graham Standish (a Presbyterian Minister in Pennsylvania) comments that while many churches focus on Jesus’ preaching and teaching ministries, as well as His crucifixion and resurrection... most give less attention to Jesus’ healing ministry. Forty percent of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, more than a third of Luke and John focus on healing... but that seems rarely reflected in the words and work of the church!

The core word, the central concept of salvation is truly one with the concept of healing. It comes from the Latin word “salvus” meaning to save AND to heal. And, of course, “salvus” is the root of our word “salve” – a substance that brings healing to a wound. And in New Testament Greek the word “sozo” means both to save and heal.

It is ironic that that which God has brought together in seamless unity, in perfect identity (salvation and healing)... all too often men and women in the church have torn asunder.

And please take note, or remember, that “to heal” means to make whole, to make holy. The Old English word “hal” is at the root of “hale”, “heal”, “healthy” and “holy”. John Koenig writes, “The central image for us is not cure but wholeness”. And Graham Standish writes, “Seeking healing means seeking wholeness and holiness for self, others and the world instead of cure; too often people want God to cure them and then... leave the rest alone”.

It is ironic that that which God has brought together in seamless unity, in perfect identity (healing and wholeness, healing and holiness)... all too often men and women in the church have torn asunder.

For some years now the Church of the Holy Trinity, this church, has given opportunity for people to ask for, pray for, healing and wholeness in our weekly Thursday service at 12:15pm. In three and a half years we have seen this service grow in numbers and in spiritual intensity... it is becoming a ministry both to church members and also to those who work in the city.

In 2008 I believe the time has come for this ministry (an interesting mixture of tenses!) to be introduced and made visible (made manifest) in our Sunday worship or else we may seem to be indicating that this “ministry of healing” is somehow parenthetical to our mission; a ministry for “those people who like that sort of thing”.

See what our readings today say of salvation and therefore of healing and wholeness.

The extent of salvation is to all the people, is for all of our being, and is in all of our time.

Salvation is to all the people. Isaiah 2:2 “the nations shall stream to it”; Isaiah 2:3 “many people shall come to it”; Isaiah 2:4 “the Lord will judge between the nations and he will arbitrate for many people”. I believe it is true that whenever we see the Lord healing in the Gospels there is faith present; it is not true that the faith was always present in the person healed. This ministry of salvation, this ministry of healing is for “all the people”. Tradition Three of Twelve Step Programs reads, “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop addictive behaviour”. It seems to me “the only

requirement for healing and wholeness is a desire to express to God our need for that is heavenly music which seems to rise above all angelic noise.

Salvation is for all of our being. Dr. Standish writes, "Some churches associate salvation with being saved from sin in this life and hellfire in the next, while others associate salvation with 'being a good person, a good citizen, helping others and being nice'". Salvation, healing, wholeness just cannot be limited to one aspect of our lives... it is of necessity, by its nature, so expansive that it causes us not only to be saved from that which does us harm but also saved for that which will do us good, make us whole and healthy. God has made us in a wonderfully intricate way and, for this life, He is intently concerned for our health and wholeness in every possible way.

Romans 13:11 "Let us live honourably"... the word here has a suggestion that we should live in a way that reflects, that becomes, that fits in with our belief in salvation and wholeness. Again, Twelve Step programs speak of "practicing these principles in all our affairs"... God wishes, God yearns, God works that we might know salvation and healing "in our affairs".

And then in 13:13 Paul speaks of actions that harm our bodies and minds, of actions that harm our spirits and of actions that harm our relationships... salvation and healing is for each, and for all of our being.

And, salvation is in all of our time. Romans 13:11 "Salvation is near to us than when we first became believers" or, as Eugene Petersen translates in the Message Bible, "God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed". The Gospel for today, the very season of Advent, reminds us that though we can speak with faith and gratitude and with affirmation, "We have been saved" but that also we are caught up in a wonderful process of "being saved". Our program, truly, is (this side of heaven) "one of progress, not perfection". As Morton Kelsey writes, "The Divine is free to move into creation" - we cannot know why it is that sometimes that movement seems inhibited, restricted but that is no reason to give up, that is no reason to ignore the divine call "to watch, to be ready, to expect" the invasion of God's salvation and healing into our lives.

I do not often quote the late nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in sermons (and probably he is more than happy with that) but this week I read these words of his, "The most common form of human stupidity is forgetting what one is trying to do"... the church, the Christian has been given by its Lord the command "preach, teach and heal"... surely we risk the calumny of stupidity if we "forget what we are trying to do" for God, in God and by God?

Recently I heard a man speak of his struggle to be free from the destructive effects of his addiction. After many attempts he made his way to a 12 Step Meeting... there he was asked, "What is it you want?". There was a long pause, a long silence... apparently many things came into his mind affecting so many aspects of his life but he answered with these words, "I want a chance". Salvation and healing is God's response to that request... I, we want a chance to be healed and whole and God will always hear and answer that prayer.

Thanks be to the God who comes to us. AMEN

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