

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on Sunday December 16th 2007 by the Reverend Alan Neale
“The Church’s Ministry of Healing – Why Aren’t You Being
Saved?”**

And so the prayer for today begins with these wonderful words, “Stir up your power O Lord and with great might come among us”! Perhaps the overwhelmingly powerful significance and spiritual possibilities of this prayer were simply too much and so, for many, many years, “Stir Up Sunday” did not remind the worshipper of the invasion of God’s power but rather of the need (wait for it)... to go home and stir the Christmas Plum Pudding!

One authority on British Life and Culture writes, “Stir Up Sunday is the traditional day for everyone in the family to take a turn at stirring the Christmas Pudding whilst making a wish”. Children, apparently, once chanted this rhyme, “Stir up, we beseech thee, the pudding in the pot; and when we get home we’ll eat the lot”. The pudding was to be stirred from East to West (in honour of the Wise Men); there were to be thirteen ingredients (to represent Christ and His Disciples) and, in the days before health consciousness and wild litigation, coins, rings and thimbles were added to the pudding!

Now I know this borders on, probably far trespasses into, the territory of TMI (too much information). But how interesting, how revealing, how sad... that a prayer of such incredible dynamic spiritual promise is relegated to matters of Christmas fare, the already straining Christmas board!

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us... Bill Wilson (co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous) writes this, “Lack of power: that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live and it had to be a power greater than ourselves”. If we want to be saved, if we want to be healed, if we want to be made whole then we have to find the power by which all this can happen and that power, friends, is with the Lord.

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us... come among us... this is the Advent Prayer for all Christians. And so today’s Prayer perfectly sets the scene for our Advent Sermon Series on the Church’s ministry of Healing.

So far we have seen that the great, divine commission to the Church given by its Lord is to “preach and teach and heal”; that salvation and healing are one and the same and that we are healed as we admit our need, anticipate our healing and accept our salvation with gratitude.

Today, “why are you not, why am I not, being healed?”.

I want to remind you first that there is a long and defined tradition in Christian spirituality which describes (perhaps even encourages) the questioning of God by God’s people. I cannot count the number of times in the Psalms when God is asked (sometimes rather curtly, often with impatience) “How long, O Lord”, “Why O God?”. That some, that many, people are not healed as we want, when we want, how we want, as we think and deem best, is for us all a constant challenge... but I will not let that challenge prevent me from tapping (sometimes pounding) on the door of God and praying, “Lord, the one whom you have made, the one you love is sick... please save them, please heal them, please make them whole”. My questioning of God will not cause paralysis of my hope.

Why aren’t you being healed? There are so many reasons but this morning I bring to your attention three – three of many but today three. Lack of patience, lack of perspective and lack of peace.

Often we are not being healed because we lack patience. We read in today’s Epistle from James, “Be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord”. I believe it is not coincidence that immediately following these words about patience, James writes about the ministry of healing – “Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet. And if you’ve sinned, you’ll be forgiven—healed inside and out.” (James 5:14,15 “Message Translation”).

In Book 8, chapter 7 of his “Confessions” St. Augustine wrote, “Da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo” – roughly translated as (wait for it) “Give me chastity and continence... but not yet”. One wit adapted this to read, “Lord give me patience... and hurry!”. All too often we give up, we surrender, we lack persistence, the great Christian virtue of “steadfastness”. “Be patient until the coming of the Lord”... “wait for, don’t give up before, the miracle”.

It is often rather glibly said, "When one door closes, another opens"... yes, but remember, sometimes the hallway between those doors is rather long!

Often we are not being healed because we lack perspective. James writes, "The farmer waits for his precious crop". Every good farmer, every good doctor of the soul, every good physician must and does realize the multi-dimensional aspect of their work. The farmer understands the work and growth that must be done underground, hidden for a good and healthy crop... and so every therapist, every physician understands that their work must be holistic, if it is to be healthy and well-established. When the sick man is brought by his friends to be healed by Jesus (Mark 2), Jesus speaks words of forgiveness... full stop, end of story! It is only when there is murmuring and complaining and doubt that Jesus turns back to the man and physically heals him. We are, I believe firmly, to recognize the importance of these earthly bodies and ask God for healing but we are fools indeed if we give primary importance to that which is temporary, transient, passing away... to that which one day will die. We must never forget the eternal, the spiritual within us and long for that to be healed with as great a passion, if not more passion, than anything else! The first ordained minister I ever really knew was a hemiplegic... he suffered almost complete loss of power of the limbs on the left side of his body. It was this man who introduced me to the Church's Ministry of Healing... it was this man who taught and exercised the Church's Ministry of Healing. I can remember that often, as a choirboy, I would tightly close my eyes and regularly pray, "Lord, today let John be healed". He never was... at least in the way that I prayed... but he was being healed. Though Paul suffered a thorn in the flesh (perhaps it was not easy for him to walk, or to see)... nevertheless he prayed for others that they be healed and... he was being healed.

Finally, often we are not being healed because we lack peace. I have a sense that this is the most crucial, the most important for us all today! James writes, "Beloved, do not grumble against one another" or, as the King James' Version reads, "Grudge not one against another, brethren". I am convinced that often the healing we ask from God... healing of mind, healing of body, healing of spirit, healing of relationship... that this healing does not take place we carry grudges, resentments and anger! Why in heaven's name would

we “nurse resentments or anger”? Why cherish, make comfortable, care for that very thing which will destroy us?
In Roget’s New Thesaurus we read, “Resentment refers to indignant smoldering anger generated by a sense of grievance”. Bill Wilson writes, “If we were to live, we had to be free of anger. The grouch and the sudden rage were not for us. Anger is the dubious luxury of normal men, but for alcoholics it is poison”.
Friends for those of us who wanted to be healed in any way, “anger is poison”.

On Friday, I confess somewhat reluctantly, I accompanied my dear wife to a performance of Peter Pan at the Walnut Theatre. If someone could have looked into my soul as I walked to 9th and Walnut they probably would have been reminded of Shakespeare’s “whining school-boy...creeping like snail unwillingly to school”. In fact I enjoyed the performance... often laughed aloud and was sometimes quite deeply moved but one of the special moments for me (and I guess for many) came when Peter Pan held the dying Tinkerbell and asked, rhetorically I am sure, “Does anyone believe in fairies?”... immediately a little voice was heard to say, just a few rows in front of me, “I do!”.

The Church’s Ministry of Healing, friends, is no fairy tale... be assured, be assured. It is in the heart and mind and will of God for us all... but sometimes we are tempted to despair and to give up hope. I have this vision of Jesus standing before the church with and ailing and largely ignored healing ministry in his hands and he looks and asks plaintively, “Does anyone believe in the ministry of healing?”