

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Rittenhouse
Square on Sunday December 23rd 2007
by the Reverend Alan Neale
“The Church’s Ministry of Healing – Where are you being
healed?”**

Psalm 80, verses three and eighteen, “Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved”.

Today is the fourth and last Sunday of Advent... we now stand, maybe some of us even teeter, on the very brink of Christmas celebrations which will then continue for the twelve days of Christmas ending with the Feast of the Epiphany. Advent reminds us, in the words of the poet Ann Lewin, that “dual citizenship holds us in awkward tension”.

Advent reminds us, challenges us, encourages us to believe and to know that Christ comes to us in many ways... as child, as Judge, as Lord... as light, as hope, as joy... “and when he comes... will he find us watching?”.

This Advent we have considered together the Church’s Ministry of Healing... that we are commissioned and directed to preach, teach and heal in the Name of Christ; that as we are being healed we will admit our need, anticipate with excitement and accept with gratitude our healing and, last week, that sometimes we impede our healing, our movement towards wholeness, as we refuse to be patient, have perspective and seek peace. Today “The Church’s Ministry of Healing – Where are you being healed?”. And by this I am not speaking of the place of your anatomy where healing is to take place but rather the best environment for our healing.

The Church, the community of faith, is the place, the arena, the setting for our healing and here we humbly but with confidence affirm that we enjoy a dimension to healing that is generally absent elsewhere... for here we affirm that the person being healed requires a community in which that healing may continue in a strong and fully rounded way. We do not believe that the person healed should then be sent on their way... alone, isolated and bereft. Of the ten Samaritans healed, one returned and received special blessing... why? Because he returned to the place and

community where he had first received the authoritative word of blessing!

The community of the Church is to be a community of courage (“Restore us O God of hosts”) a community of comfort (“Show the light of your countenance”) and a community of commitment (“And we shall be saved”).

In Lisa Scottolini’s book “Killer Smile” (published in 2005) a character needs desperately to hide from her pursuers... Ms. Scottolini writes, “Where else in a city did nobody ever go? A church. The Church of the Holy Trinity, right on the Square. A huge, brown sandstone edifice with castle like Norman tower on the northwest corner of the Square”... ouch! “The church where nobody ever went”... friends, the church which is a courageous, comforting and committed community will always be a place where people want to go, to which people are drawn. George Gallup recently said, “The focus of the twentieth century has been on outer space but the focus of the twenty first century may well be on inner space” and all but a fool would not want that “inner space” to be healed and made whole.

The Church – a courageous community (restore us O God of hosts). This past week I was talking to someone who was about to make a public confession of her faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. She told me that she was excited and I heard myself remarking, “Um... now that’s two ‘e’ words you don’t often hear in the same sentence... excitement and Episcopal”. And yet the church, this church, is intended by God to be a place where people are inspired, excited, encouraged to expect and anticipate great things from a great God. Listen to these words of Bishop Claude Payne of Texas, “A community of miraculous expectation is a community alive with the power and potential of the living God. It is an exciting place to be, one that acknowledges the presence and purpose of God in human life and that gives thanks for God’s gifts bestowed on the faithful. Expectation is a power, re-energizing hope-filled emotion. Expectation is the right of every Christian”... wow!

In Isaiah Ahaz is given permission by God to ask for a sign as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven... but Ahaz refuses, resists and so God acts to give Ahaz courage. Friends, we are called to be a

courageous community engendering hope and expectation in those seeking to be healed.

The Church – a comforting community (show us the light of your countenance). There will be those who are not healed as they required or desired... such will need to be comforted; there will be those who need wait for their healing to come... such will need to be comforted; there will be those who are puzzled by, almost fearful of, what God has done for them... such will need to be comforted... and the church should be the place where the strong, warm and appropriate comfort and care of God is offered and enjoyed. It is all too common for fear to trouble and attack the person being healed, the one who is receiving the grace of God... consider for a moment our Gospel for today... Joseph is afraid but then is comforted and then acts with courage, strength and dignity. For those being healed, the church is to be, needs to be, a comforting community.

And, finally, the church – a committed community (and we shall be saved). It is a nonsense, it is an impossibility, it is ridiculous to expect that a church can be the agent of God's healing power and grace unless it is also a community committed to being healed itself. A church community which is patient with strife, contention and factionalism will never be able to a community in which God's power to heal is experienced and celebrated; and a pastor or priest of such a broken community who, in the name of peace and compromise, allows such behaviour to be unnamed and unchecked is no true shepherd of the sheep. Bishop Payne has written, "For the most part people do not go to church to get involved with issues. They go to church to get more fully involved with God". St. Paul begins his magisterial epistle to the Romans in a manner seen elsewhere... he describes the nature of the church community to which he writes "God's beloved...who are called to be saints"... the community belongs to God, is loved by God and is intended by God to be saints, to be holy, to be whole... to be healed!

In his novel, Saturday, Ian McEwan writes of "amosognosia – a useful psychiatric term for a lack of awareness of one's own condition". I am praying that we who are members of this church community will not suffer from amosognosia... that we will know and celebrate what we are intended by God to be... a courageous, comforting and committed community.

Please pray with me that this church may continue to grow into being “a welcoming community of miraculous expectation and transformation” – AMEN.

Advent – Ann Lewin

Advent.
Season when
Dual citizenship
Holds us in
Awkward tension.
The world, intent on
Spending Christmas,
Eats and drinks its way to
Oblivion after dinner.
The Kingdom sounds
Insistent warnings:
Repent, be ready,
Keep awake,
He comes.
Like some great fugue
The themes entwine:
The Christmas carols,
Demanding our attention
In shops and pubs,
Bore their insistent way
Through noise of traffic;
Underneath, almost unheard,
The steady solemn theme of
Advent.
With growing complexity,
Clashing, blending,
Rivals for our attention,
Themes mingle and separate,
Pulling us with increasing
Urgency,
Until in final resolution,

The end attained,
Harmony rests in awful

Stillness, and
The child is born.
He comes,
Both Child and Judge.
And will he find us
Watching?

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