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THE MYSTERY OF UNANSWERED PRAYER

(Lakeside Chapel Betty's Bay 13 Jan 08)

Readings: Luke 11.1-10 Jn 15.1-8

New year's resolution – not to churn out old sermons – certainly not unless revamped with fresh inspiration from the HS.

This year marks 50 years of preaching for me – what a privilege it is, and as I get older I am ever more aware of the enormous responsibility of expounding God's precious Word –

So this morning I have to warn you that although I have spoken many times on prayer, I have never before tackled the topic in this way with this emphasis.

Much of the new inspiration for this sermon has come through Philip Yancey's remarkable book "Prayer – Does it make any difference?" which I commend to you.

But it has also come as a result of looking back on 50 years of preaching, and the emergence of **physical healing** as a normal part of the ministry of most churches.

There is no doubt that a remarkable shift has taken place. 50 years ago, certainly well into the 60s if not 70s, physical healing to most Christians was anything but mainstream; many would have regarded it as a cultish practice.

But as God brought the Charismatic renewal to his church, so little by little there has been an increasing interest in, and

indeed belief in, a God who offers physical healing today. And indeed as the decades rolled on the world and the media have become increasingly fascinated, rather than cynical, about the subject. A 2003 survey in the US reported 500 clinical studies documenting correlations between prayer and better health. 8 out of 10 Americans say they believe miracles can happen today, and more than half of all doctors report observing healings in their patients that defy medical explanation.

So the God of the Gospels and the early church is alive and well and still in the business of healing today. The so called cessationists in the church have had to withdraw to their corner.

For myself I was once dramatically and instantly healed of laryngitis just an hour before I was due to preach in response to prayer from others, and only 2 or 3 years ago I was partially healed of my type 3 diabetes so that I was able to make a dramatic reduction in my medication. And on one occasion in particular during our ministry in Zimbabwe I was used to bring the gift of immediate healing to a woman about to be operated on the next day for gallstones. On the other hand I have persistently prayed many prayers without receiving the answer I anted, particularly for my wife's arthritis.

If we look overseas to countries such a China where the church is underground and still suffering terrible persecution, we find that dramatic physical healings are the norm – have you read for instance “The Heavenly Man”

But the fact remains, many, in the western world, indeed most, who seek healing are not healed. And all the American statistics, all the books from China, bring no comfort to those to pray persistently and in faith for healing, and yet their afflictions, disabilities and diseases take their normal course.

Early on in the exciting spring days of the charismatic movement this truth was brought home to me dramatically by two poignant case histories of people I knew well.

In 60s - Christian & Trish

In 80s – David Watson

We have to conclude God is exceedingly selective in the answers he gives.

Why is God selective? Why does it often seem so unfair?

Is there a reason why one is healed and another apparently rejected? One prayer is answered and another apparently rejected.

And to make the mystery even greater, why the extraordinary promises about prayer in the NT?

It would have been so much easier if Jesus had said to his disciples:

“I want you to pray for your needs. Human beings cannot know what is best so I must decide if and how and when to answer your prayers. But spell out your requests and they will all be carefully considered.”

I could handle that so much more easily. But instead, Jesus taught like this:

MT 18:19 "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

MT 21:21 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done. ²² If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."

It's a huge mystery. And because I know that the God I serve is all-knowing, all-loving, and always perfectly good I must start from this point:

"It not that there isn't an answer, it's just that there isn't an answer now. Better a mystery than a bad answer."

Paul spells it out in 1 Cor 13: **"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."**

But you know it's right that we should enquire as far as we can; he has not left us without clues; we do know *in part* even now. He has ennobled us with minds; we are to use them.

We are to be transformed, says Paul to the Romans, by the **renewing** of our minds, not by the **removal** of our minds.

But we come to explore the mystery as creatures before a creator; humbly, dependent, accepting of His will even if we don't understand it.

JOB 26:14 And these are but the outer fringe of his works;
how faint the whisper we hear of him!
Who then can understand the thunder of his power?"

ISA 55:8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts,

**neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the LORD.**

**ISA 55:9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

So in that spirit of humility, let's look for some of the clues to this mystery of unanswered prayers this morning:

First, it is wrong to say as some do, 'God wants to heal everybody, Jesus healed everybody when he was here on earth, it must be only our lack of faith that stops him doing so now.'

3 statements, all wrong!

In truth the scriptures and history teach us that God has always been selective in physical healing.

The Bible demonstrates that at special times in His-story when he has wished to **accredit** his servants with special authority, he has used signs, wonders, and miracles of healing much more widely.

When Moses was about to be given the Law, the 10 commandments, the Israelites not only witnessed the miracle of crossing the Red Sea but they were fed with manna and quail, and water gushed from the rock face in the desert

When God wanted to introduce and accredit his prophets, we have the spate of healing miracles, and raising the dead through Elijah and Elisha.

When God sent his only Son to save the world, how did he draw the attention of the Jewish and Roman world to Him. Listen to Peter explain it in his sermon on the day of Pentecost:

AC 2:22 "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

But the assertion that Jesus healed everyone when here makes no sense at all. He must have passed numerous coffins being carried out for burial; he stopped and raised only the widow of Nain's son. Death was all around him; Jairus' daughter was raised, and the only other was Lazarus who we are told was raised specifically so that God's Son might be glorified thro it, and as a setting for Jesus remarkable statement "I am the resurrection and the life."

And the same selective but mysterious pattern marked his other miracles. At the pool of Siloam for instance, what of the many other disabled persons waiting to get into the water and be healed?

Moving on, how was it that the early church gained respect and recognition, and what accredited the apostles:

Acts 3.9 When all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

2 Cor 12.12 The things that mark an apostle--signs, wonders and miracles--were done among you with great perseverance.

After that, when the church was established, we find very little mention of physical healing in the epistles, except that it is still very much there as a spiritual gift in 1 Cor 12,. and James of course gives us the blueprint for dealing with sickness today.

“If anyone is sick let him call for elders to pray over him, and they will anoint him with oil, and the prayer of faith will raise him up”

But the point is this, the fact that the epistles have so little to say about physical healing would indicate that healing miracles became the exception rather than the norm once the church was established. And that of course is borne out by the fact that in his letters Paul mentions 3 friends who were extremely sick as well as his own ailment – his thorn in the flesh – that the Lord had failed to heal.

What of the centuries since? Biographies, autobiographies of the past centuries and news coming out of Nepal, India and China today suggest to me that where there is persecution, where the church needs to be accredited, signs and wonders are used by God as a much more common phenomenon than in parts of the world where the church is established and accepted.

Yes, God’s nature is mysterious but consistent. He has always been selective. But he alone as Creator and author of life, chooses whom He will.

And then of course, it is wrong to suggest that as many do, that it is lack of faith that prevents God healing. Faith is undoubtedly an important ingredient – Jesus made that clear – but often it was the faith of others that Jesus responded to, not the faith of the sick person. In the extreme case, dead people don't exercise faith!

And let it be said LOUD and CLEAR that nowhere do the Scriptures suggest that God applies a sort of faith thermometer to see whether we come up to the mark. We can be absolutely confident that his selection criteria is not that. After all, this was the same compassionate and wonderfully encouraging Jesus, who commended faith as small as a grain of mustard seed,

Next very briefly, let us reverently visit the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus himself is praying. “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; but not my will but yours be done.”

Was that not this the ultimate unanswered prayer? Let it be said softly and reverently, the salvation of the world depended on God turning down that prayer.

Suffering is never arbitrary; God always has a purpose in it. There's always a bigger plan. Our understanding is very limited. Our horizons are very short. If only we could look out of the windows of time, and catch a glimpse of eternity, we would see that God's glory and the extension of his Kingdom matter much more than anything on earth.

God's plan and purposes are so much bigger than anything we can ever imagine.

It's against that background that,

CS Lewis, that great Christian luminary of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities used to say:

‘Suffering is God’s megaphone to a deaf world.’

When I gave a talk similar to this one Durban last year a man in his 60s came up to me afterwards and told me that his son had died in an air-crash 3 years earlier and that experience had led directly to him finding the Lord. God caught his ear through the tragedy of losing his son; there was joy in heaven as a result of that sinner repenting. One man’s human life was cut short – a time period that is but a moment in eternity. But another’s man’s soul was saved for all eternity.

It’s hard, but peace comes with ACCEPTANCE that GOD always knows best.

Here’s the testimony of a woman who was terribly abused as a child and for many years on the brink of suicide. Eventually she found Christ and found peace. She said:

God has answered my crucial question. “Do you love me , God?” That was at the heart of my turmoil and confusion and he has answered that one with a resounding YES. My other questions will have to wait. I still feel wounded and sore, and even raw in places, but I have come to know enough of an answer to enable me to live and even live abundantly.”

Next Clue: **Suffering is God’s honours school of holiness**

We know don’t we from our experience of those who have endured painful and chronic illness, that personal suffering is the path to maturity and greater holiness.

There develops, doesn't there, an indefinable something, a fragrance, about those who take their suffering well? Paul writes to the Romans:

RO 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.

That's the challenge, isn't it? As I was preparing I prayed 'Lord grant that those folk at Lakeside Chapel on Sunday morning will actually dare to look forward to suffering when it comes – we rejoice in our sufferings, says Paul, because it produces perseverance, character and hope!

The same theme is to be found in the parable of the vine told by Jesus in John 15.2, where Jesus talks of *pruning* the branches in order that we will bear more fruit. Pruning is painful, but it produces the best fruit.

This is how Amy Carmichael, that remarkable woman who gave her life to rescuing children from Buddhist temples in India expressed it.....she suffered an accident that severely disabled her in her 40s:

Hast thou no scar?

No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?

I hear thee sung as mighty in the land?

I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star:

Hast thou no scar?

No wound? No scar?

Yet, as the master shall the servant be,

And pierced are the feet that follow Me;

But thine are whole. Can he have followed far

Who has no wound? No scar?

One more verse which has always been a great blessing to me in times of hardship:

**ISA 45:3 I will give you the treasures of darkness,
riches stored in secret places,
so that you may know that I am the LORD,
the God of Israel, who summons you by name.**

Isn't that wonderful? In the darkest times there are treasures to be discovered, if we take our suffering rightly. Why? So that I may know He is the Lord who summons me by name.

I tell you, if you want to get closer to the Lord, and hear him summoning you by name, there's no better way than a bit of suffering.

Do you know the parable of the bar of steel?

As it emerges from the forge it is worth R50.

If it is made into nails they are worth R100

If it is made into needles they are worth R200

If it is made into knives they are worth R500

If it is made into watch-springs, their value is many 1000s of rands.

What so enhanced the value of that bar of raw steel?

The more it was heated in the furnace, the more it was beaten and hammered, the greater its value became.

When suffering comes and there is no immediate answer to prayer, what matters most of all is how I respond.

A Christian who spent 10 years in a Communist jail said on his release:

'Those were the richest years of my life'

Hudson Taylor of the 19th century China Inland Mission used to quote Rev 21:

‘When J comes He will wipe away every tear. I would not like to be one of those with no tears to wipe away, would you?’

Robert Murray McCheyne the Scottish preacher who died aged 29 of a chronic disease said:

Some believers are much surprised when called upon to suffer. They thought they would do some great thing for God; but all that God permits them to do it seems is to suffer. Everyone in heaven will have a different story, but everyone a tale of suffering.

We conclude that between the 2 questions “Does God answer prayer?” and “Will God grant my specific prayer for this sick child or this particular chronic illness?” lies a great pool of mystery.

But there are enough clues to give us peace and to enable us to respond with acceptance to his sovereign will even when I am not selected to receive the answer I want. He knows best.

And remember this : For him to answer every prayer would mean he was abdicating and handing over the task of running the world to us. None of us wants that.

Above all, his love and compassion embrace every situation of answered prayer because *he came, and his prayer at the time of his greatest need remained unanswered.* He understands answered prayer.

You know, followers of the LJ look forward to seeing his scars. We shall never forget the Cross because Jesus alone will retain his scars. The rest of us will have perfectly healed bodies. I think we’ll have all the answers on that day. But in the meantime we need to live with mystery and paradox. If we can do that we shall

have healthy minds and spirits marked by peace and gratitude. That is much more important, isn't it, than a healthy body?

Great peace comes when we ask as children, but we let him decide how and when to answer.

I close with a few words from Yancey's book:

Charles White, a college professor in the state of Michigan, spent several terms as a visiting professor at the University of Jos in Nigeria. While there he visited a missionary graveyard in a quiet garden beside a chapel on Nigeria's Central Plateau. Most of the graves, he noticed, were small: two- and three-foot mounds to accommodate child-sized coffins. Thirty-three of the fifty-six graves, in fact, held the bodies of small children. The tombstones went back as far as 1928, and old-timers in the mission could tell him the stories of only the most recent deaths.

Two of the infants lived just one day. Others lived a few years, falling victim to the tropical diseases common in that part of the world. Melvin Goossen was twelve when he and his brother fell off a suspension bridge over a rain-swollen creek. Their missionary father, Arthur Goossen, dived in the creek to save one son. But when he dived after Melvin, both father and son drowned.

Professor White listened to these and other accounts of missionaries who had come to Nigeria in full awareness of the dangers, and of their children who had no such choice and succumbed to those dangers. He imagined the sorrow of households that no longer heard the happy cries of a three-year-old, that lost a first-grader just as she was learning to read. He concluded:

The graveyard at Miango tells us something about God and about his grace. It testifies that God is not a jolly grandfather who satisfies our every desire. Certainly those parents wanted their children to live. They pleaded with God, but he denied their request.

The graves also show us that God is not a calculating merchant who withholds his goods until we produce enough good works or faith to buy his help. If anyone had earned credit with God, it would have been these missionaries. They left all to spread the gospel in a hostile environment. But God does not hand out merit pay.

'The only way to understand the graveyard at Miango,' White concluded, 'is to remember that God also buried his Son on the mission field.'