

THE MINISTRY OF HEALING

By MAURA RAMSBOTTOM

RELIGIOUS CONSECRATION expressed in a healing service is a commitment to minister to man in his need, and in that ministry to witness to Christ in his healing of the sick. Fidelity to this vocation involves an understanding of man, not only in sickness but also in the wholeness to which he is summoned. A real encounter with the person of Christ as he healed is essential. Such an encounter is possible today only because we have his Spirit. The Constitution on the Church of the second Vatican Council tells us that through religious 'Christ should be shown contemplating on the mountain, announcing God's kingdom to the multitude, healing the sick and the maimed . . .' ¹ In this article some reflections are presented on certain aspects of that witness to which sisters engaged in an apostolate of healing are called.

Jesus came that men 'may have life and have it to the full'. ² This mission involved physical healing of the sick, not as an accidental nor merely as an expression of compassion. It was an integral part of his message, because he to whom the gift of 'life to the full' is offered is an embodied spirit. Recognition of this truth is essential to any understanding of Jesus's healing ministry or of ours. Man is not one who *has* a soul *in* his body, in temporary confinement, awaiting release into true freedom. Neither is man one who *has* a body: his body is not something apart from himself, of which he can dispose at will, leaving the real self untouched. He is his body because he is embodied spirit. To ignore the body and its physical ills is to fail to recognize the person; the gift of 'life to the full' is ultimately a summons to *personal* relationship in love with the Father and with all men.

JESUS'S HEALING MINISTRY

Healing the sick was an essential aspect of his ministry for Jesus himself, and was seen as such by the apostles in their preaching and by the evangelists. The phrase, 'Jesus went about doing good', ³

¹ *Lumen Genium*, 46.

² Jn 10, 10.

³ Acts 10, 38.

probably represents one of the earliest descriptions of his mission. Luke presents Jesus at the beginning of the public ministry as one who has been anointed by the holy Spirit to preach and to heal;⁴ and when the Baptist sends disciples to ask Jesus, 'Are you the one who is to come?', the reply is given by pointing to the signs: 'Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor; and happy is the man who does not lose faith in me'.⁵ The witness of what 'you hear and see' tells one who reflects on its significance not only that the messianic era has come, but also that it is identified not merely with the healing of disease or with mighty works. It is centred on a person: 'happy is the man who does not lose faith in me'.

In his healing ministry, Jesus reveals his person and summons man to respond in a commitment to him. This revelation-response expressed in the healing is, in turn, a sacrament of that 'life to the full' to which man is called in Christ.

In healing Jesus reveals himself

The Word was made flesh. As Son of God it is his relationship with the Father which distinguishes him as person. Receiving all from the Father, he is always open to him in total receptivity, while responding in a movement of love towards him. As Son of God made man, this relationship with the Father, this receptivity and total openness in a movement of love, is expressed in his embodied spirit. It is expressed both in his contemplation of the Father and in the fulfilment of his role in the Father's plan: that is, in his redemptive relationship with other men. As a relational being, Jesus both receives from and gives to other persons. He receives from the cultural milieu into which he was born, and contributes to it. He receives from the people with whom he relates and gives to them. Above all, he receives from the Father and gives himself totally to him. His healing ministry reflects this network of relationships. This ministry reveals Jesus as fully human, like to us in all things except sin; and it reveals this same person as Son of the Father.

Jesus is totally present to the sick. He listens to their requests, he speaks to them. At times, he touches those who are ill or is touched by them. And even when he withdraws from the crowd, the sick who are brought to him are healed.

⁴ Cf Lk 4, 16ff.

⁵ Mt 11, 4-5.

For a blind person, for one unable to see, the word is an exceptionally effective mode of presence. The men described by Matthew hear that Jesus is passing. They respond with a word boldly directed to him, but the crowd also hears that word and reacts with a command to be silent. However, the men are willing to suffer rejection and scorn from the multitude, so that the one who is passing may hear them. 'Jesus stopped, called them over and said, 'What do you want me to do for you?''⁶ That the crowd rejects their word means that they reject the blind men themselves: they are not alive for them or to them. Jesus's stopping and calling the men, on the other hand, signifies his recognition of them as persons, his acceptance of them as partners in a dialogue. The word of Jesus gives life even before his touch restores sight and they follow him.

Jesus's word sometimes imposes silence on those who witness his healing. A danger that the implications of the healing word remain unperceived is probably the principal reason for this injunction. Healing in the community raises the question of the identity of the healer. Jesus is not a mere wonder-worker; only as a result of personal reflection on the word (spoken verbally or expressed as deed) can each one come to know that there is no need to look for another; that in their midst is 'the one who is to come', the Word made flesh. Jesus speaks not only with his voice: in his whole being he *is* word. He acts not only in walking, anointing, giving. His word is act.⁷ It is the event in which God summons man to be possessed by and to take hold of 'life to the full', and in that summons gives the power to respond.

Frequently in the gospels we read that Jesus made physical contact with those whom he healed. He touched them, took them by the hand, laid his hands on them. Sometimes those in need of healing sought to touch him or that he might lay hands on them.

When, in the Old Testament, reference is made to the hand of God, or to his arm, the authors were very much aware that one did not, and in fact could not, see God's hand or arm. One merely experienced in a very concrete way the power which was signified in the term 'hand' or 'arm'. However, in Jesus, this power, protection and guidance of God is tangible; real physical contact is made

⁶ Mt 20, 32-33.

⁷ Commenting on Lk 5, 13, St Ambrose says: 'There is no interval of time between the work of God and his command, because the work is contained in the command itself'. Cf *S Ambrogio: Commento al Vangelo di San Luca*, 1 (Roma, 1966), p 228.

with the hand of him who is God made man. This is a healing contact; it restores wholeness. His touch inspires confidence while giving the ability to hear, to see, to walk again; but above all it gives confidence to 'arise and have no fear'.⁸ His taking hold of the sick gives the support and help necessary to walk; but above all it supports and develops even the 'little faith' expressed.⁹ His laying on of hands gives the power to be among those of whom Jesus said 'to such belongs the kingdom of heaven'.¹⁰ This is possible because the human reality of his touch and of his taking hold of a person is the vehicle of divine energy. It is the action of a person who is God – God become man in Jesus.

Jesus is one who is concerned about his brothers who are in need, and he accedes to their request for healing.¹¹ Their coming to him is an event in which his own vocation as 'the one who is to come' is unfolded. In healing he knows himself and reveals himself as the one promised by the prophets, at whose coming 'the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed'.¹²

In him too the law finds its fulfilment. This dimension of the person of Jesus is known and manifested especially in the sabbath healings. He was a Jew, unique in his fidelity to the covenant; hence he would gradually penetrate more deeply into the values celebrated on the seventh day, first at Nazareth and later as he journeyed with his disciples. Familiar with the law as interpreted by the rabbis, he would have learned that when there is danger to life (and such danger was interpreted very broadly), healing is permitted on the sabbath.¹³ However, Jesus sometimes celebrates the sabbath by healing even when there is obviously no danger to life. To do what even the tax-collectors and the gentiles do is good, but it is not sufficient.¹⁴ To heal on the sabbath when there is danger to life is good but it is not sufficient. We cannot set limits to the expression of our love, since we are called to be 'perfect as your heavenly Father

⁸ In Mt 17, 7 we read that 'the disciples fell on their faces, overcome with fear' when they saw Jesus transfigured before them. This is a reaction to the presence of God (cf Exod 3, 6): man cannot see God and live (cf Exod 33, 20). And yet, in Jesus, man is not only given the power to see God but to be like him, because 'we shall see him as he really is' (1 Jn 3, 2). ⁹ Cf Mt 14, 31. ¹⁰ Mt 19, 14.

¹¹ Faith in Jesus is usually expressed. In two of the four healings recorded by John, faith is seen as the climax of the healing, a reality to which the sign of physical healing points.

¹² Isai 35, 5.

¹³ The principle that the sabbath law was to be waived in certain emergencies was universally admitted (cf *Babylonian Talmud* 'Yoma 85a'), the only dispute being as to the precise text by which this exception might be justified.

¹⁴ Cf Mt 5, 46–47.

is perfect';¹⁵ and his love is boundless. That is why the fulfilment of the law is obtained and its wisdom found, not in an adherence to the letter which is dead, but in responding to the invitation of a person: 'Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest'.¹⁶

From Matthew we learn that the Baptist had difficulty in identifying the activity of Jesus with 'the works of the Christ'.¹⁷ He sent disciples to ask, 'are you the one who is to come?': that is, the one who will accomplish the great work, the salvation of his people. Fifteen times the fourth evangelist uses the word *ergon* (or *erga*) when Jesus speaks of his works; and always these references express a relationship with the Father.¹⁸

Having healed the man at the pool, Jesus replies to the accusation of sabbath-breaking with the words, 'My Father goes on working, and so do I'.¹⁹ While the seventh day was a day of rest, the jews admitted that God does not cease his activity: people are born and they die on the sabbath; and so the Lord must continue the work that is exclusively his – to give life and to judge. Jesus's statement is immediately understood for what it is, a claim to equality with God.²⁰

That this claim is justified becomes evident in the ensuing discourse; but it also becomes clear that such a claim is not an assertion of independence from God. Rather is it a claim which can justifiably be made only because of total dependence on the Father: 'the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing'; but the Father has shown him all, because he loves him.²¹ Not only are the healings 'works' which the Father has given him to do; they may also be spoken of as the work which the Father does in him.²² Hence the healing as *erga* are a particularly clear revelation of the Son: of him who has received all from the Father, and whose whole being is 'with God' (*pros ton theon*),²³ because of their mutual love.

In healing, Jesus summons man to a personal response

In being present to the sick, in speaking, touching and even in silence, Jesus reveals himself as man and as Son of the Father. This revelation is a summons to the other; and, like all self-revelation,

¹⁵ Mt 5, 48.

¹⁶ Mt 11, 28.

¹⁷ Mt 11, 4ff.

¹⁸ Only once (7,3) do others refer to Jesus's deeds as works.

¹⁹ Jn 5, 17.

²⁰ Cf Jn 5, 18.

²¹ Jn 5, 19–20.

²² Cf Jn 14, 10.

²³ Jn 1, 1.

the invitation to respond may be accepted or rejected. Risk is involved in real communication: the summons may be ignored by the other, the revelation of self not accepted. The more radical the summons, the more fundamental the self-revelation, the greater the risk. In healing the sick, Jesus reveals his person; and in doing this he takes a risk, the extent of which no other person could take. In revealing himself, he reveals the Father,²⁴ leaving man free to accept or reject that communication of the Word which is Life.

To be healed by Jesus or to witness his healing is an event in which the sick, the crowds, the pharisees and the relatives meet the person of Christ. For some, 'to meet' means to respond to his drawing them to himself. They believe and commit themselves to him. For others, 'to meet' is to be confronted with a demand which they are unwilling to accept; and so they withdraw from him and from 'life to the full'. To be amazed at his works,²⁵ or even to request him to come for the wrong motives,²⁶ is not sufficient. Nor is it possible to adopt a neutral position in his regard.

It is in their own life-situation that people experience this confrontation; and for each one this situation is an open question. The sick are those who are very much aware of their need for help and of their inability to aid themselves. They meet or seek the One who has been going about 'curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among people'.²⁷ The crowd see a man who was blind, lame or mute now healed. They see and hear Jesus, and know that no man has ever spoken like him. The pharisees have searched the scriptures, are familiar with the commentaries of the rabbis. Now they see and hear a man who claims to be the one about whom Moses spoke.²⁸ The townspeople of Nazareth enjoy a prolonged contact, far longer even than that of the twelve; Jesus has grown up in their midst, has influenced them as a member of the community, and has been influenced by them, as he 'increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men',²⁹ by reacting not only in his relationship with the Father but also to the people, events and circumstances of every day. However, the crowd, his own townspeople and the pharisees lack that freedom in which they could recognize that they too are blind, deaf, mute and in need of healing; that in order to achieve the fulness of their own being, they must go out to the neighbour and to him who is the Truth which will set them free.

²⁴ Cf Jn 14, 9.

²⁷ Mt 4, 23.

²⁵ Cf Mk 2, 12.

²⁸ Cf Jn 5, 46.

²⁶ Cf Lk 4, 23.

²⁹ Lk 2, 52.

The crowd, for the most part, seek only the elation and excitement of miracles; the townspeople desire a share in the (human) success; while the pharisees seek only an approbation of *their* interpretation of the law. The sick are among those who have faith, who can accept the good news which can be received only by the poor: that is, by those who recognize their need for healing and who are open to hear the word, to allow themselves to be touched by the Nazarene. These are the 'little ones' to whom the significance of the healing is revealed.³⁰

In healing, Jesus communicates 'life to the full'

Jesus came to preach the good news and to heal.³¹ But one must be able to interpret 'what you hear and see' as the works of the Christ, if physical healing is to reach the fulness of its potential.

Seen in the context of the total proclamation by word and deed, the healing ministry of Jesus is presented in the gospels as a manifestation that salvation has come in him. Word and deed, preaching and healing, are shown as complementing each other in his ministry. The preaching announces or interprets the deed, thus enabling one to grasp its significance. On the other hand, the word of love which is preached is not an abstract message; it is made concrete in the tangible expression of that love when lepers are cleansed, the blind see and the lame walk.

John constantly brings to our notice this deeper dimension of the healing of Jesus. The miracles are 'signs'; and therefore, of their very nature, to see them will involve permitting oneself to be drawn into their deeper reality. These signs are no mere illustration; they are 'a symbolical anticipation or showing forth of a greater reality, of which the *semeion* is nevertheless itself a part'.³² Basically, it is not only an incapacity to see, to hear or to walk, but an incapacity to love which must be overcome. And this Jesus does in giving the power to see him who is the Light, to hear him who is the Word, to walk after him who is the Way, because he is the Truth and the Life. Truly to see the signs is to believe the works; and the effect of such belief is 'to know for sure that the Father is in me and I am in the Father'.³³

³⁰ Cf Mt 11, 25.

³¹ Cf Lk 4, 18.

³² C. K. Barret, *The Gospel according to St John* (London, 1955), p 63.

³³ Jn 10, 38.

THE HEALING MINISTRY TODAY

Love and creativity find their concrete expression in the healing ministry of Jesus. If he commissioned others to heal, it is that men might continue to experience that particular witness to his love and to his creative power.

While the bridegroom was with them, the disciples did not fast; neither was there mention of illness left uncured or of a positive value in sickness. But Jesus gave a 'shocking' witness to the value of vicarious suffering when 'he took our sicknesses away and carried our diseases for us',³⁴ especially on Calvary.³⁵ The 'crippled, the blind and the lame'³⁶ have access to the banquet.³⁷ They are not absent from the kingdom in its present state, although, when it is fully realized, they too will be whole because 'death shall be no more'.³⁸ However, while creation is still not completely free from 'its bondage to decay',³⁹ the groaning of the Spirit as a sign of new life is expressed in a sickness situation. A ministry of healing is still necessary as man evolves towards 'life to the full'. Within this context some are called to reflect the healing ministry of Jesus. To do this demands fidelity to the Spirit with which he was anointed to proclaim the good news and to heal. It means reflecting the values which he lived as he went about doing good.

Healing and consecration

For religious, healing is not merely an occupation or even a service that is incidental to their vocation. It is an articulation of their consecration in the Spirit. It is a communication, in which they penetrate and express their innermost being in giving to and receiving from the sick and the community to which they belong. The witness to the boundlessness of the Father's love, to which our life of consecrated celibacy calls us, is given tangible expression in a healing service, in which all people – without distinction of class or creed or even those for whom there is no hope of physical recov-

³⁴ Mt 8, 17.

³⁵ Citing Isai 53, 4 in the context of Jesus's healing ministry underlines Matthew's approach to this ministry, which he sees as being very part of Jesus's redemptive work. In Mt 21, 14–15 Jesus heals in the Temple and the children cry 'Hosanna to the Son of David'.

³⁶ Lk 14, 21.

³⁷ This positive attitude to illness in which the sick are counted among the poor who are open to receive the word is in marked contrast to that of the community at Qumran, where the sick are not permitted to take part in a sacred assembly. Cf *Rule of Qumran*, 11, 3–9.

³⁸ Apoc 21, 4.

³⁹ Rom 8, 21.

ery – receive our loving care. Living our life in communion sustains and supports each one in this total and permanent gift of self. At times our vocation will be directed towards the healing of human dignity, the pouring of oil on the wounds inflicted by thoughtlessness and unconcern. This apostolate is exercised both inside and outside the community.

Being available and serving in the apostolate of healing not only expresses the sacrifice of praise that is our life of consecrated celibacy lived in communion; it also nourishes that same sacrifice. Love is made ever more fruitful when it is given to the sick, the suffering and the needy. Poverty is enriched when we are open to receive the inspiration of patience, confidence and dependence on our heavenly Father from those whom we encounter in our healing mission. The word of God very often sounds clearer in a situation of suffering, while we are stimulated by those whom we serve to a more courageous response to the implications of that word.

Healing is personal communication

While Jesus could heal at a distance, the occasions on which he did this were few. Usually there was a direct encounter between him and the sick. Healing is not only the counteracting of disease by material remedies. It is certainly this; but true healing is far more. Persons, not just diseases, are encountered in a relationship between the healer and the sick that is truly personal. Such a relationship usually extends to the family and community who suffer with the sick one and are called to be his support. A growing sense of the value of the person, of the understanding of man as a psychosomatic unity and of the brotherhood of all men, highlights the need for personal relationships in healing. The experience of being called to reflect Jesus's healing ministry makes it imperative that we respond to this need.

A further dimension of this relationship today is that which exists between the healing team and, for example, the civic health service. In this age of the masses and the ever-growing need for the pooling of expertise, 'my neighbour' may be the group of which he is a member and 'I' the medical team. This community dimension is something very precious; in the Spirit it increases rather than diminishes the personal aspect in healing. Only because we have the Spirit can we present Jesus healing the sick today. And the Spirit is communion between persons. Because of his quality as person, he is in the Father and in the Son in the same way. He is one person in

two persons. In history, this same Spirit is one person in many persons, building us up to be one Body in love. With this Spirit Jesus was anointed to heal; the Spirit in which we are one is the Spirit of Christ.

Word and touch are healing gestures. Jesus said 'I will', and the leper was cleansed;⁴⁰ 'he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them'.⁴¹ Reflecting the healing ministry of Jesus today does not usually imply the miraculous; but it does demand that the word spoken, in which essential information is sought or instructions given, be an understanding word, a real communication between persons. A touch only will hardly heal physical illness directly; but the touch of one who has the necessary scientific knowledge and skill helps to discover the cause of the malady while communicating a certain gentleness of approach, inspiring confidence in the healer and even in the sick person's own ability to support and overcome his suffering. This is communication in the Spirit; it is to give an efficient service which also builds up the Body in love.

Healing and the proclamation of the word

A healing service that truly reflects the gentleness and patience of Jesus, his concern for the person, his life-situation and culture, is evidence that love and creativity are lived realities today; that man is called to use these forces to make the world a better place to live in, to help his fellowmen and thus, with them, to reach the fulness of his own being. This is a witness that can be seen and heard; it is a proclamation of the word.

Nevertheless that word may not always be clear, the full dimension of the message may not be grasped. The healing service may reflect only very poorly that oneness with Christ in the Spirit which is religious consecration. For people fall short of their ideals. Pressure of work, human frailty or even a denial of love may blur the witness. Incurable disease, especially when suffered by the young or by the parents of a young family, raises serious questions. But the word can, 'as a lamp shining in a dark place',⁴² reveal something of the deeper meaning of suffering and of healing. Such a proclamation of the word is needed if the reality of sickness and of healing is to be grasped in its fulness.

'He took our sicknesses away and carried our diseases for us'⁴³ in his healing ministry; but it is above all when 'he yielded up his

⁴⁰ Mt 8, 3.

⁴¹ Lk 4, 40.

⁴² 2 Pet 1, 19.

⁴³ Mt 8, 17.

Spirit'⁴⁴ that he released the power by which death (and sickness) would eventually be overcome. In the meantime, sickness continues to be a reality, and this power to overcome it is experienced only in a limited way: in scientific advances, certainly, but above all in the strength already given to overcome illness by uniting one's sufferings with Christ's own sacrifice which is offered for all men. At such times it is the word which proclaims the scandal of the cross that may be most relevant as it unfolds, in some measure at least, the meaning of what is seen and suffered.

At other times, the deed may be seen as an articulation of the word preached: 'Power came out of him that healed all'.⁴⁵ Of particular significance in this context is the relationship of scientific healing to, for example, the sacrament of the sick and to prayer. Physical healing may be an effect of the sacrament, and such healing is signified in the 'matter' chosen by the early Church. (In the ancient world oil was widely used for therapeutic purposes.⁴⁶) And even if a physical cure does not result, the sacrament is at the same time directed towards a healing which may be experienced in a sense of integration; here the whole person is caught up into a freedom in which he surrenders himself to the Spirit. A medical service that is directed towards the whole person can never be unmindful of this aspect of healing.

'Ask and you shall receive' is a word which is realized in a striking manner within the healing context. This is a situation in which the need of prayer – and of support in prayer – is keenly felt. Answering this need is a real service. When a close relationship between word and deed is evident within the context of scientific healing, the prayer offered by the sick and by those who serve them is an expression of man's great vocation to be a living sacrifice of praise. Such prayer avoids any implication of being a petition merely to the 'God of the gaps', or an exercise which serves as the opium of the (sick) people. Human effort and technical skill go hand in hand with a personal relationship to the God of love from whom comes all power: power which is fully ours only because it is from him.

CONCLUSION

Jesus went about doing good, curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people. In doing this he revealed himself as the one in whom men could reach 'life to the full'.

⁴⁴ Mt 27, 50.

⁴⁵ Lk 6, 19.

⁴⁶ During the first centuries of our era, while this oil was blessed by a bishop or by a

Consecrated in his Spirit to heal, we are called to reflect that ministry as we prepare for the day when 'the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality'.⁴⁷ The evolution of this new life is revealed through scientific advances in conquering disease, and above all through a healing service, in which there is real communication between persons and in which the vocation of the whole person to a transcendental humanism is recognized and appreciated. Word and deed, proclamation and interpretation, must complement each other in this ministry, reflecting that of him who was anointed with the Spirit to preach and to heal.

Healing the body is important because only in the body is man a person. It is as person that both the healer and the sick are called to share the personal life of God which is the communion in love that is Father, Son and holy Spirit. This is the gift of the Spirit which shall be given; 'on that day you will understand that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you'.⁴⁸ This is the reality of which the healing ministry of Jesus – and in him all christian healing – is a sign. It is integration, life, love. It is the ultimate accomplishment of the work which the Father has given him to do, the work which the Father does in him, and through his Spirit in all believers who heal and are healed in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.⁴⁹

priest, it could be administered to the sick by a lay person, Cf J-Ch. Didier, *Le Chrétien devant la maladie et la mort* (Paris, 1960), pp 35-45.

⁴⁷ 1 Cor 15, 54.

⁴⁸ Jn 14, 20.

⁴⁹ Cf Acts 3, 6.16.