

<b>Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2012</b>		<b>5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year B</b>
<b>Grahamstown Cathedral</b>		
<b>7.30 &amp; 9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>Septuagesima<sup>1</sup></b>
<b>Job 7:1-7</b>	<b>Ps 147:1-11</b>	<b>(3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday before Lent)</b>
		<b>1 Cor 9:16-23</b>
		<b>Mark 1:29-39</b>
<b>HEALING, NEW LIFE, NEW HOPE</b>		

A few years ago, the young teenage daughter of a local family fell ill with a disease that gradually paralysed her. It began when she had less and less control over her muscles, and could no longer hold a pen or pencil; then after a while could hardly walk; found it more and more difficult to breath; and in spite of wonderful medical care, was on the point of death. The good news is that she did not die; she recovered wonderfully, regained the use of her limbs, was able to walk and run again – and was well ahead of me during last year’s Mountain Drive half-marathon. She is a fit and healthy young woman today.

What healed her? There was medical care and treatment. There was physiotherapy. There was the love and support of her parents, her family, for the many months of her illness, and through her recovery. There were the prayers of many, many people.

What brings healing to the sick? What brings hope to situations of utter despair? What shifts things within us, when we feel trapped and with nowhere to turn?

**Job and the human condition**

The story of this young girl, together with our reading from Job 7:1-7 tell of the human condition, with all its struggles, heartaches, and the questions we ask as we stare into the depths of despair and sorrow. We first meet Job in chapter 1: he is described as “blameless and

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<sup>1</sup> Latin for “the seventieth” [day before Easter]. “Sexagesima” is Latin for “the sixtieth”; “Quinquagesima” is Latin for “the fiftieth” [day from Easter]. Cross & Livingstone (eds.) 1997, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. OUP, Oxford, 1483.

upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” (Job1:1) And he is blessed: a large family, many children, great wealth “so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east.” (Job 1:3). But then things start to unravel. Robbers attack and kill his workers, and steal his cattle, his camels, his donkeys, all his wealth. His children die in a terrible storm when the house is blown down by the wind and crushes them to death. Job himself falls ill with dreadful sores all over his body.

The rest of the book of Job is Job’s dialogue with his friends, and with God, trying to understand the meaning of all this.

Why do things go wrong in our life? Why do dreadful things happen to us? Why do people suffer at the hands of others? Why do evil people have so much power over others? Why the cruelty? The injustice? Oppression? Why do people fall sick with the most dreadful diseases? Why are babies born deformed? Why is there poverty, famine, starvation? Where is God in all this? Where is God when my world is falling apart, when my life is in ruins? If God is so all-powerful, how can He allow these things to happen?

Much of the book of Job consists of a series of debates, as Job’s friends try – and fail - to answer these questions. In the end, Job challenges God, rages at God, as many of us may do, asking God what is going on, demanding an explanation. God answers Job by showing him the expanse and wonder of creation. Job is overwhelmed by what God says to him, and replies, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.... I had heard *of* you..., but now my eye sees you....” (Job 42:2, 5). And, finally, God blesses him again, with wealth, more children, the respect of the community, and a long and happy life.

It is easy to stand back and say, “There you are! Wonderful – it all works out well in the end. We don’t have to worry: alles sal regkom.” And we can read the story of Job, or other success stories, and say, yes, it all did come right in the end.

But what about when we are in the midst of it all? When we are on the ash-heap of despair, as Job was? When our world has fallen apart, when dreadful things are happening, when we are powerless to bring about change? When we are “like a slave who longs for the shadow” (Job 7:2), living “months of emptiness and nights of misery” (Job 7:3), when our days “come to their end without hope” (Job7:6)? Then there is no quick or easy answer, no immediate solution.

That is the reality of the human condition, the reality for you and me, for many around us. It is into this reality that Jesus comes, with words and signs of good news and hope and healing.

## Healing

Jesus comes into our world, into our lives, to bring healing. In our Gospel reading, he goes with Andrew and Simon to Simon’s mother-in-law, and heals her from her fever. That evening, people bring to him those who are sick with various diseases, or who are demon-possessed, and he heals the sick and casts out the demons. A leper, someone with a dreadful skin disease, comes to him. Jesus is moved with pity (or anger); he touches him, touches the untouchable, and heals him (Mark 1:40-41). Lives are transformed, people are set free. The kingdom of God is at hand. God is at work.

I wonder what our reaction is when we read these stories in the Gospel, about miracles, healing, exorcisms, evil spirits, demons. Some may dismiss it all as nonsense; fairy stories, made up, not true, impossible, things don’t happen like that. Or we may say, “If it happened like that then, what about now? Why aren’t we seeing people healed in that way, today?” Or “We have hospitals and antibiotics and psychiatrists; we don’t need prayers and rituals.” Or “I prayed for my sick aunt, and she still died.”

We don’t have the whole picture. Healing is a big word. I have seen and heard of a number of examples of miraculous healing, people recovering from illness when doctors had given up. Things happen, people do get better, in ways not explained by medical science.

People are set free from the power of evil. Miracles, things that cannot be explained in any other way, do happen.

Some do have gifts of healing. They pray, and people and situations are visibly touched and transformed by God. Jesus as the Son of God had this gift. The healings he performed were a sign of the kingdom of God. God gives to the church, and to certain people, the gift of healing. We must not be too afraid to ask, or too shy to pray. I am constantly amazed at how people are strengthened and helped when they receive the laying-on of hands, with prayer for healing, or when they are anointed with oil, for healing. God does something.

There is a growing awareness of holistic healing: the link between health care and spiritual care; the healing of our bodies, our minds, our emotions, our spirits.

As Christians, as the church, we encourage people to be healthy, and live healthy life-styles – no gluttony, over-eating; avoid drunkenness and drugs. We support with prayer and care and love, those with addictions and mental health problems. We provide a secure environment in which people can find fresh hope. We educate and warn about HIV-AIDS, which is both a health issue and a moral, spiritual issue.<sup>2</sup>

We invite God into our lives, into our world, into our struggles and despair – and He does and will come. “In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.” (Mark 1:35). We invite God into our world, “when it is still very dark”, into our darkness – and the light will come. The sun will rise. The kingdom of God will come.

### **New life, new hope**

These first few weeks of the new year have for me been gently transformed by the daily readings, at Evening Prayer, from Isaiah 40-

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<sup>2</sup> Anglican Communion News Service: Faith in Health and Healing: Reintegrating the church with health services. Posted on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2012.

55. The prophet was speaking to the people of Israel in exile, reminding them that there was hope, that God would do something new in their lives, would restore them as a nation. For me, as I continue to pray and long for healing, new life and new hope in our church, in our community, and in my own life, these words are a life-line. I close with verses that were read at Evening Prayer this past week<sup>3</sup>, in which the prophet Isaiah uses the image of a woman who has never had children to describe the desolation of the people of God who think that they have no future and no hope. God through the prophet says otherwise, and promises them a future:

“Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord. Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left, and your descendants will possess the nations and will settle the desolate towns.

“Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more. For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.

“For the Lord has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, like the wife of a man’s youth when she is cast off, says your God.

“For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer.” (Isaiah 54:1-8)

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<sup>3</sup> Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> February 2012

## **Conclusion**

“They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)