

A Call to Healing

James 5:13-20

In 2003 we began a Saturday evening service of prayer and healing here at St Paul's that ran once a month until a couple of years ago. This service was modelled on some LCA resources, as well as on the passage we have heard today from James.



Originally, it was a part of St Paul's being a Safe Place. The pastoral need we had discerned was that there were people in the congregation who were suffering with various chronic illnesses and that these people would value a quiet space in which to reflect, pray, give thanks, be fed by the sacrament and be anointed and blessed

for healing.

The order of service had these words at the beginning:

This service provides an opportunity for you to hear Scripture and reflect, pray for relief and healing for yourself or others, and receive forgiveness, the Lord's Supper, blessing and anointing. Through these means God works to restore you and make you whole.

We never had more than about 15 people at these services, but I know that they meant a lot to the people who attended. And whilst we never witnessed any dramatic healings during the service, people said they were sustained by the sense of peace and calm and well-being: from being in God's presence; and from receiving prayer, anointing and communion.

How does this relate to today's epistle? At first reading, it can appear as though James is giving us instructions for what we are to do. But I wonder whether it might be more helpful to turn it around. Instead of looking only at what he says, let's look at the needs that he was responding to, and see whether those needs resonate with us as a community, and how we might respond to those needs.

Our Christian community, any Christian community, is not filled with people who have it all together. Christian communities are full of people who are broken – and who know it, and who come together to feed on God's Word and the Sacrament, so that we may receive some kind of peace and healing. And our community is diverse, so we know that there are both people here who are suffering and we know that there are people here who have much to give thanks for, and who want to sing songs of praise. Our community is very much like the one James was writing to!



When you think about it, our Communion liturgy is built for exactly these things. We have the “Lord Have Mercy”, and we have the song of praise, the “Glory to God” or whatever other song of praise we choose for the day. We have prayer, we have confession, we hear God's word, we commune together, in both senses of the word.

Let's drill down a bit deeper into some of these.



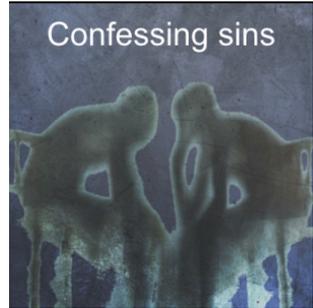
Suffering and prayer

We are called to pray when we are suffering; but when we are suffering, it can be particularly hard to pray.

In Romans, God promises that the Spirit will intercede for us with sighs and groans. But we also have each other to intercede for us. That's why each Sunday we pray faithfully for those who are suffering, who are in need.

That's why it is so important that we continue to pray for each other, because when you are suffering, it can be so hard to pray for yourself.

We are called to confess our sins. We confess our sins every Sunday, and we hear the reassurance of God's forgiveness and love spoken through the Absolution.



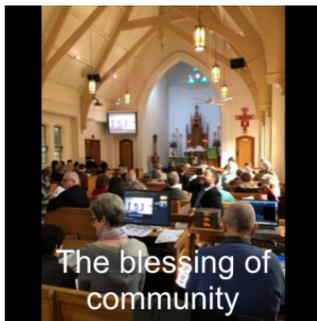
But why in this epistle does James connect suffering and sickness with sin? One thing I do NOT think he is saying is that your particular sins are causing your particular sickness. But I do think that the link between sin and sickness is really important, because it is part of our common experience, as sinful beings living in a fallen world, where sickness is part of who we are and what happens to us.

So sickness happens as a result of our general sinful state, our world's sinful state, our separation from God.

But what is the sin that James asks us to confess here? What is he calling us to?

I think that this is an invitation into being a *transparent* community: a community that owns up to its faults, that owns up to its brokenness, and seeks reconciliation both within the community and with those around us.

It means being in Christ's presence in this community, and being known for who we really are, warts and all; knowing that we can talk about what's going on with us, our brokenness; and knowing we can seek healing, whether that's physical, or in relationships, or in our relationship with God.



And how richly blessed we are in community!

Yes, we can praise and pray on our own, in our own spaces; but to come together, in this community, to sing praise together, to

lament together, to pray together, to receive healing from prayer, from God's Word, from God's body and blood – these are the benefits of being in community, and of acknowledging one another as God's beloved children.

You might know people who have left St Paul's, or left the church, for a variety of reasons. Some of them may be hurting because of something that has happened within our congregation. Some of them may just be fed up with church altogether.



I know that when I am working in the hospital, there are plenty of people who are ready to demonise the church because of what's come out in the Royal Commission findings. Sadly, we need to own that.

But those terrible abuses are not the whole picture. We also know that the church is a place of healing, of community, of sustenance, and of Christ's presence with us.

How do we, then, invite people back into this community? How do we reconnect? How do we understand ourselves as broken, and yet offering healing?



We cannot do this in our own strength. We can do this only because Christ is with us, because Christ has loved and forgiven our brokenness. This is the Gospel message, over and over again: Christ is to be found there in solidarity with those who know their need of healing and salvation.

It is not about pretending that we have it all together. When we are honest and open about our lives with one another, Christ is in our midst. When we make ourselves vulnerable and seek people's prayers and support in our quest for healing, Christ is right here in the midst of us.

Our vulnerability to one another, and our shared suffering, make us more fully the body of Christ, the Christ who suffered the brokenness of the world in his own body. Christ stands in solidarity with us, but much more than that – he suffers for our redemption. He brings healing and salvation to us in this community, and through us he offers it to those around us.

Amen.

