

## **St. Luke was a doctor. So what about sickness?**

There are two Christian attitudes to sickness, which are so different that they can only be held together in faith.

In the old Book of Common Prayer the priest when he visits the sick says “Dearly beloved, know this, that almighty God is the Lord of life and death and of all things pertaining: as youth, strength, health, age, weakness and sickness. Wherefore, whatever your sickness is, know you certainly that it is God’s visitation.”

This, of course is so unpopular that it is not even in the prayer book we use. But so what? Are we no longer concerned with truth? It is undoubtedly Christian truth that whatever you’ve got, it is the will of God ‘whether it be to try your patience or for the example of others, and that your faith may be found in the Day of the Lord laudable, glorious and honourable .... or else it be sent unto you to correct and amend in you whatsoever doth offend the eyes of your heavenly Father.’

The purpose of God’s visitation is spiritual healing, not in the modern sense of the using spiritual means to cure physical disorder, but in the more proper and exact sense of the use of physical sufferings to cure spiritual disorder. This is the original Prayer Book attitude to sickness: it is a visitation of God to be used profitably for the health of the soul. And this is all of a piece with the collect for St. Luke’s day, which concentrates on the diseases of our souls to be healed by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by St. Luke the evangelist. And this is exactly the attitude which is deep down in many of the sick who say such things as: “These things are sent to try us” and “This is the will of God”.

However there is a second attitude to sickness which demands equal attention. According to this, God wills the health of man, both body and soul. Sickness is an evil and therefore against the will of God. This is made very plain by the healing ministry of our Lord. Healing is part of the gospel. The Christian should be no more resigned to sickness than he is to sin. With God all things are possible. It is an attitude to sickness which lies behind all the noble medical traditions of our country.

So what are we to say? If we take our stand on the ancient Prayer Book traditions, what of the healing miracles of Christ? Are they just symbolic?

That is impossible. 'Ought not this woman, whom Satan hath bound, Lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond?' Jesus obviously regarded physical sickness as a satanic bond from which men were to be released by the gospel. Death is the wages of sin. What then is medicine? An impious attempt to interfere with judgement?

We can see why in deference to modern medicine and modern sensibilities the ancient Prayer Book was changed. But you can't change the Providence of God. What happens when despite all the efforts of doctors and nurses and healing evangelists laying on their hands, the disease still remains, and if the patient says, "It is the will of God. This is the cross I am commanded to bear?" And what do you make of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for here is pain and suffering, not escaped from, but accepted and used for the salvation of the world. We also are promised our own crosses. Are we going to reject altogether the Christian tradition that an incurable disease, a physical weakness and a thorn in the flesh may well be such a cross?

There is a solution to these difficulties but it is not easy. On the one hand of course the Lord can make us whole. And as Lord of Creation he works modern miracles just as he did in the gospels. But in all honesty we have no reason to claim that he ought to. The faith of Christians is not simply faith in the power of God. It is faith formed over the years by penitence and love. So when the Christian asks himself "What have I done to deserve this?" if his conscience is alive, the answer will be long and detailed.

The faith demanded of us is a faith formed over the years by love; for love gives us that insight into the mind of another and sees things as he sees them. "If thou wilt, thou canst" we say. If he will not, we know its not because he cannot, nor because he is indifferent, but because he has a deeper part for us to play, because we have a greater role in the divine strategy. And our part is to say: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."

There is then no "Christian attitude to suffering" in the sense of a rigid and invariable policy always valid in every circumstance. The only Christian attitude is to draw nearer to the person of Christ to learn what his particular will is for us in our particular circumstances.

## **The Collect for St Luke's Day (18 October)**

Almighty God, who didst call Saint Luke, whose praise is in the Gospel, to be an Evangelist and physician of the soul; may it please thee; that, by the wholesome medicines of the doctrine delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of they Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, every one God, world without end. Amen