



Fourth Sunday of Lent  
3 April 2011

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## Wounds and Healing – A Sermon for Mothering Sunday

A sermon by Revd Clare Herbert

**Readings: 1 Samuel 1.20-end; John 9.1-12**

“As you live, my Lord,” Hannah cried, “I am the woman who stood here before you, praying. For this child I prayed.”

In the name of God, Creator of all things, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit. Amen

As the lecturer here in Inclusive Theology part of my task is to consider the needs of people who identify as disabled. In addition to checking whether as staff and congregation we are aware of need and how we use language and gestures about need I am doing some thinking of my own about disability and our talk about God. I was much helped in this the other day when talking with someone who identifies as disabled. He said that for him Christian theology is a real problem because we are always trying to heal people, rather than accept them and honour them for who they already are!

He surely has a point!

In today’s Gospel reading - When Jesus meets the blind man, just for a change, why can’t he say, “You look a good chap, disability and all, Come, follow me!”

Let’s look at a possible reason why Jesus acts and speaks as he did.

In the culture in which Jesus grew up illness and disability, any sort of apparent weakness, like Hannah’s childlessness for example, or a young boy’s blindness from birth, had been wrongly understood to be signs of God’s anger and punishment – did this man or his parents cause this blindness the people ask, while Hannah’s sister wives ribbed her mercilessly for her lack. Jesus felt compelled to challenge such a punishing image of God. He heals the man and with that healing declares all people as they are are invited to the banquet of God’s love. “The blind will see, the lame will dance, and the poor shall have good news preached to them.”

We live in a different time with new understandings of pain. For us illness and disability, wounds and vulnerabilities, are not signs of divine anger or punishment. We seek instead their physical, psychological or environmental cause and possible cure, or not. We know not every pain is simply rectified. So we have a different question to ask of each other and God.

“If we face the reality of this pain,  
if we accept the longstanding nature of this disability,  
if we cry over our neighbour’s lack of water or peace or well-being, in Libya or Fukushima or Gaza  
what does it mean for us to live well?

What does it mean to be whole and ill, to be whole and disabled, to be whole yet knowing the painful reality of others lives across the world?

At St Martin’s we sometimes call ourselves God’s Good Friday people. That’s not because we don’t know Easter and healing in our lives, but because the wounds made by Good Friday’s nails are still

very evident among us – the wounds of mental illness, the wounds of being stateless or homeless, the wounds of being single or of feeling your marriage has failed, the wounds of loneliness and ageing or being rejected at work, the wounds of waiting, the wounds of compassion – being overwhelmed at the suffering of the world.

For us the question is, how to confront these wounds in such a way that we are not overcome by them? How may we use our wounds to heal, to walk towards Easter with the marks of Good Friday indented in our hands?

Every day of Lent we have been studying and praying the words of Julian of Norwich who said

“The dear gracious hands of God our Mother are ever about us”

Mother Julian, who lived as an anchoress, one withdrawn from the world to pray, study, read and counsel others, inhabited a tiny stone and earth cell next to a church in Norwich in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Faced with the tragedy of war with France, with the Black Death, with sharp divisions between the rich and the poor of her own society Julian asked herself similar questions to the ones we are asking this morning. “What does it mean to be wounded and yet to live well? To be disabled and healed, all at the same time? To cry over the world’s woe, and yet trust God and be glad?”

After serious illness and meditating on the death of Jesus, waiting for wisdom to emerge over many years, she came up with some surprising answers which may help us today on Mothering Sunday some 6 centuries later.

Firstly she suggested that when we suffer pain and loss we start to understand something of how God sees the world. We can use our experience of pain, whatever it is, to start to see with God’s eyes. In the gospels we see Jesus suffering in sadness over Jerusalem’s impending doom, we see Jesus in shaming personal rejection by family and friends, we see Jesus harassed and tripped up and bullied by religious authorities and state torturers, we see Jesus in excruciating physical pain on the cross. God in Jesus is not dazzlingly healthy, invulnerable, self-sufficient, quite the opposite is true, yet in him we see God. We can therefore use our pain to help us see through God’s eyes.

Secondly, because Julian sees God like this in Jesus, she calls God our Mother. God is not only he who leads and directs us forwards to new challenges and fresh activities like a father - she is also the one beside us where we are, sheltering, holding and showering us with love along the way.

Julian in her time was trying to do something which we need to do in our time. She was trying to restore a balance in our picture of God so that we in all our difference may recognise ourselves as God’s children, made differently in God’s image. Julian understood God to be strong Father, Holy Trinity and just Judge but she also wanted us to know God as our Mother, feeling for us in our weakness, soothing us in our fear, holding us close in our pain. Julian wanted to affirm the role of Mother in God and to affirm that which is motherly in all our human nature – God herself listening, waiting, relating, responding, in love and being loved.

If we learn to see with Julian’s eyes we see that to be frail, disabled, wounded, ill, apparently lesser in some way like Hannah before her baby’s birth, is not necessarily and purely to be one who is in need of change but one who like Jesus displays the vulnerable strength of God as we are.

We may live well with our wounds and find them healing. We may trust them to help us see the world with God’s eyes. We may use them to have compassion on ourselves and others, to tend our world mercifully with justice and with love.

Amen.