

Blandford Forum - Sunday 22 July 2007

Rev Tim Storey

"When God is Quiet "

Isaiah 55

During A few years ago, when our youngest, Jessica was about 4 or 5 an incident happened which was quite profound. Jessica was tired so went to bed for a sleep. Making the most of the situation Claire nipped out to the garage for 10 minutes to clean out the Guinea Pigs only for Jessica to wake up and find herself alone in the house. She called but no one answered She looked but there was no one there to be found. Eventually a tearful Jessica found Claire but, for her, it was deeply distressing, even though Claire was never more than a few feet away and would certainly have never left her alone. That is sometimes how I think we find ourselves in relation to God. God will certainly never leave us: time and time again we read of God saying "I will never leave you or forsake you" God is never out of earshot and yet there are times which we all experience when God doesn't appear to answer. When we cry out to him pleading for him to intercede in the problems of our life in body, mind or spirit and there is silence. We want him to be our spiritual "buddy" who we can turn to at any moment of day or night. We want him to be our spiritual "fixer" who will instantly sort out what ever needs sorting out. But we all know that the reality is that these things do not often happen - or in the way we want or expect them to.

When I prepare people for baptism and confirmation, one of the things we talk about is "faith". "Faith" is one of those nebulous things that people on Songs of Praise talk about in such a way as you wonder what it actually means. "Without my faith I never would have coped" That may be true - but what do people actually mean by "faith" ?

It needs to be rooted in solid beliefs.

It needs to be alive and growing.

It needs to be expressed in a relationship

It needs to be acknowledged and talked about openly.

Faith, as the writer to the Hebrews says: "is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Now, if I am honest I have always struggled with this verse because it seems to contradict itself: "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." It involves two definite statements where faith by its very definition relies on a certain amount of ambiguity and the existence of doubt.

There are areas in life where we have total faith: when you switch on a light bulb, you are expressing faith without realising it in the power station, in the electricity company, in the electrician who fitted the light, even in the light bulb itself ! That is a near certainty of faith- but just as Thomas had doubts so, inevitably, do we. Jesus never scolded Thomas for his doubts: Jesus recognised they existed and offered him the proof and then went on to commend those who would have faith who would believe even though they had not seen what Thomas had been privileged to witness.

In Mark 9 a man brings his son to Jesus seeking healing. Jesus says: "Everything is possible for him who believes." and Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

We constantly seek answers to help us in our unbelief, the portion of us which has doubts especially when God appears to be silent. In particular, when it comes to physical healing we often face a silence where God says "wait". And it is the hardest silence to live with.

Our faith has a structure to it which relies on some fixed points which we would call the creeds and many other points which rely upon us working out our understanding of how to approach the problems we face in life. Gradually we build what is called a “systematic theology” 1 Corinthians 14:33 says “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.”

There needs to be a consistency in our understanding of him, even in those areas where we must have faith, rather than a defined view of him. Hundreds of years ago, someone called Archbishop Hooker said that we rely upon “scripture, reason and tradition” to deal with these issues: God has given us Scripture as the touchstone, against which everything must be measured, against which nothing must be contradicted. God has given us a reason to enable us to wrestle with these things in our minds - and he has given us a tradition: 2000 years of others seeking to find a way through the issues we, too, wrestle with in our generation as they did in theirs. And we should listen to their thoughts. However enlightened we may think our generation is.

Isaiah 55, which we heard earlier, begins with where people are “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” Just as Jesus said “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” So God speaks through Isaiah to those who are genuinely seeking God in the midst of a spiritual famine or drought, to those who cannot understand what God is doing or why. But he is wanting them to focus on the Spiritual rather than the physical situation:

Verse 3: Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.

Verse 6: Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

This chapter speaks of the desire of God for people to realise that health of the soul is far more important than the health of our bodies and that the way he deals with us is, first and foremost, focussed upon the health of our souls. But it recognises, too, that there are times when our reason deserts us. When we cannot understand what he is saying to us and faith must kick in.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

The fact is that there are times when our powers of reason cannot explain the pain we feel whether in body, mind or spirit and we have to accept that God knows more than we will ever know: about us, about the illnesses that afflict us and about the nature of life and death itself. That is what faith is about. That is what a faith that accepts the fact of doubt is all about. It doesn't stop us trying to rationalise and understand and I don't think it is necessarily a bad thing but sometimes faith is all there is. We want to believe that a loving God would surely want to heal his children of their physical ailments: but if God wants us all to be healed - why doesn't he? He has the power to do what he wants and, therefore, it is no leap of faith to see that if he wants to heal us, then he could instantly.

But the result, would be the banishment from the world of all sickness, something that entered the world as a direct result of the Fall. Why, then, doesn't he do it? I believe it is because people would see the healing of other individuals happening and seek it for themselves, and the entire world would be Christians - but for the wrong reasons!

Sometimes there is a suggestion that God wants people to be healed but they are not, because of some kind of “blockage” on the part of the sick person such as a lack of faith,

unrepented sin in their lives or a generational sin. God will want to deal with some of these issues but I believe this creates other problems because it suggests that people can create a blockage that can prevent God from pouring out his grace.

Yes, in some cases, where the illness is a spiritual, sin-related issue, it could well be the situation, but it cannot be made as a blanket statement concerning the healing of all illness. When Jesus Christ died on the Cross, it was that whoever believed in him would find eternal life (John 3:16). In other words, sin was dealt with once and for all and the blockage in the relationship between God and people was removed - to suggest that anything (including sin) can create a blockage to God's Grace is to suggest that the Cross did not deal with some aspects of sin. Some might point to the fact that Jesus healed all who came to him, as noted in Luke 4:40 and other places - but Jesus healing ministry was unique and if we try to inflict his healing ministry on those who follow, we inevitably end up arguing that they are the ones to blame for not healing everyone who comes to them.

Every day, it seems the news tells us of a fresh bunch of scientists having a breakthrough in one illness or another. Praise God that there are men and women working in these areas - it is the natural desire of humanity to seek ways in which disease can be defeated. But if the logical conclusion of faith is to seek a way a formula so that we can all (in theory) beat all illness - then what about the defeat of death? If illness is with us as a result of the fall, then so, even moreso, is death the result of sin. The ultimate end of faith is the belief that, as Paul wrote in Philippians "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

The ultimate healing of the body takes place in death, for as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

Our bodies are weak and frail. The breaking through of the Kingdom in Jesus showed the glory and majesty of what will happen in the world to come when God makes all things new - but as we live in the "now but not yet", we can pray for that grace to be poured out, but it cannot, in all its fullness because the Kingdom has not come and, therefore, not all illnesses will be healed.

We can safely say that suffering in the world is generally random in nature, except where there is a clearly human cause attributed to it. However, the outpouring of God's grace in healing is not random, but determined by desires of his heart, which are far beyond our understanding. The desire of the human mind to "box" the area of healing, to "formulate" it and try and explain the silences we often experience is understandable. If we think we can possibly explain such things, or work out why things do or do not happen, then I would suggest we are guilty of trying to understand the mind of God, something tends towards arrogance on the part of his created human beings.

Psalm 111.10 says "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise."

The "fear" of the Lord comes from an awareness of our state before him: forgiven sinners, relying on him completely for salvation and wisdom. "Fear" of the Lord is the excitement of being in the throng before the throne, the awe of being in God's presence, the wonder of the mountain-top experience that Peter, James and John experienced. It is not a belief that somehow we can "understand" God - quite the reverse. "Fear" comes from an awareness of our need to trust God that he knows what he is doing in our life and in the lives around us, that he is pouring out his grace, as he decides is appropriate, according to

his wisdom - which is far beyond our own understanding. I would love to be able to understand the secrets of creation and especially those of suffering. I have to be satisfied that like the child God wants me to be, I need to trust that he is always there whether or not I can see him or hear him at that moment: to trust that "Father knows best", even when it all seems so wrong - it does not stop me pleading with him in the belief that he hears and responds, sometimes with a miraculous answer, sometimes with a practical answer and sometimes with an answer that says "no, that is not what I want". I must simply trust - that is all I can possibly do. It is not a failure of faith, it takes an even greater faith to trust against our better judgment - and that, I believe, is what God calls us to do.

Amen