

A couple of weeks ago, I went after church to the Pronto at Ouchy to pick up milk, still in my work clothes. It is always a scrum and a woman of indeterminate age swung around and struck me in the chest with a bag of carrots. 'Pardon!' she exclaimed. Again, before I could stop myself, I said 'Madame, vous etes pardonnee.'

She paused and gave me a smile that clearly came from within. A flash of realisation, perhaps, or even a blessing. Of course, I don't have a clue what happened next, whether it was gone as soon as it had happened or if, somehow, it had struck a chord, refreshed a neural pathway.

It led me to think on the impact of a word, or three. What causes something to happen in the sacrament of the present, fleeting moment?

We could ponder for hours the nature of a sacrament, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. I don't imagine that what I do as a priest is causal. When someone is baptised, I am not sure that the liturgy of baptism and the actions of a priest creates something. I like to think it is more a signification, a statement of what God has already done. And the same with any assurance of forgiveness, any absolution. We are already forgiven but I have the privilege and the opportunity to remind people of that. It is God who forgives, not I.

So, I like to think that any such action is that of God who speaks, and something happens. From the beginning, even from before the beginning, God spoke. 'Let there be light'. And it was so. And through the ages, the voice of God, so powerful and present in all time and every place, is causal; it is the energy within the divine being which gives life, restores and, so often, brings healing.

Remember, 'Take up your bed and walk'. "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly and 'Lazarus, come out.'

Of course, there are many accounts where touch is the work of Jesus the healer; think of the spittle he made with the dust of the ground to make a poultice for the blind man. Here, it is both, but the word of healing comes first and the following touch confirms the cure of this eighteen year affliction.

We hear that it was a 'spirit' that had crippled her all these years. Jesus, in his own words 'sets her free'. We often have monolinear understandings of our afflictions and our present reliance on advanced medical solutions, splendid as they are, can lead us to overlook other aspects of healing that flow through this particular story. Whatever it meant by the spiritual cause of her suffering, Jesus' actions demonstrate both healing of the condition and, in the touch, compassion for her as a whole person, made whole again.

In Christ, our understanding of healing needs to take in our being in all its complexity. Human pain, suffering and physical disability bring with them a weight to bear. Some weeks ago, we reflected on demonic possession and the Gerasene man Jesus heals. We asked then, 'how do you deal with your demons'? Often, we cannot shed them easily but we can live with them in an attitude of peace rather than wrestling with them and, as a consequence, fighting our inner selves. That way, healing

is elusive. We remain in a state of constant conflict. And we need to learn how to fight the good fight, not the bad one!

Some decades ago, I was running a school where there was strife, a constant state of battle-readiness, after a bitter episode with the founder of the place. There was acrimony on all sides and it was not at all healthy. I met the man unexpectedly at another school function and he was clearly very unwell. In fact, I only could recognise him because his wife was with him.

He spotted me and called me over. I went in trepidation to speak with him wondering what onslaught might be waiting. He was calm, sat me down and asked me how the school was. I told him, and he smiled, saying 'That is what I was hoping for'.

He leaned in and said 'I am healed, you know'. A pause. His condition spoke for itself. 'You know what I mean, don't you?' 'Yes, I do' I said and placed my hand over his thin and bony one. 'And I am more than glad to hear that.'

I left determined somehow to heal the bitter division, to bring such reconciliation as could happen, but he died ten days later. In a way, it had already happened. He was healed and in that moment, the pain and crippling tension of many years had fallen away.

He had heard, I am certain, the healing invitation of God to heal himself from within, because that is where our healing so often waits for our own work to begin. His cancer had not left him but he went to God made whole again in his response to God speaking. He needed to hear and to act upon what he heard.

But, we ask, how does God speak? What are we to listen for and to recognise when we hear it? How does God speak to us? I suggest it is not in Hebrew, or English or in a text message, but it may be in any of these. What is required, I say again, is for us to be so tuned in to God in all aspects of our life that the resonances of the Spirit, forever around us and within us, are allowed to settle on receptive hearts and souls.

It is saddeningly bizarre that the thought police of Jesus' faith community had their own receptors turned off. We know the prohibitions on work (and I am a bit of a fan of a day of rest but that's another sermon!) but healing is not one of them. And what is it that suggests that responding to a word from God, who assumedly created the rules in the first place, might break the law! At least they were put to shame.

Malcolm Guite quotes Edwin Muir's Prometheus to remind us, bleakly, how our own church culture can degenerate into such wordy legalism that [we can] miss the mystery altogether:

The Word made flesh is here made word again...  
the mystery is impaled and bent  
into an ideological argument.

Let us then work again and again to find the word within the words, the rules and all the silly verbiage that passes for religious conversation, or dialogue about human justice and social integrity. That voice of the Divine speaking in us and through us will bring wholeness and healing if we hear it and let it realise in us his own presence that we remember here today.

Take and eat; hear, listen and be fed. Renew us, heal us, word of life and love.