

Advent Mission The Sick Fool 2

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Please let your eyes, your hearts, your minds absorb it as you listen to it.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Whoever is wise, let him give heed to these things. Let men consider the steadfast love of the Lord. Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities suffered affliction.

They loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

He sent forth his word and healed them and delivered them from destruction. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to the sons of men, and let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and tell of his deeds in songs of joy.

[1 : 29] Whoever is wise, let him give heed to these things. Let men consider the steadfast love of the Lord.

I ask you to bow your heads for the prayer which follows that reading. Amen. O Lord, our God, your light wakes us from sleep and raises us from death.

Bring light in our darkness, the light which Christ gives, the light which frees us from the power of death. Amen.

I would like just to say, in a brief word of introduction how very grateful I am to be here from Toronto to be part of this wonderful week, to be present with old friends again and to make some new ones. I'm very grateful indeed. The Psalms are poems and so the images of the Psalms are poetic images and they lend themselves much more perhaps to poetic reflection than to analysis. C.S. Lewis's Layman's Book for the

Layman on the Psalms was entitled Reflections on the Psalms. This then takes the form more of a reflection, a personal reflection, rather than a commentary. The conviction of the poetic mind is that none of us has ever had an ordinary experience. That is to say that every experience, every loss, every longing, every love, every failure in love, and every illness is not only a real experience, but also a figure of something else. And so, in poetry, truth is given shape. Poetry is a little incarnation. Poetry gives body to that in our experience which is otherwise invisible or inaudible.

[4 : 49] And so it is with Psalm 107. The passage from this Psalm upon which our attention is focused this evening is, like the other three pictures in the quartet, metaphorical. As in all reflection on scripture, we take our clue, we take our clue from the language of scripture and from the literary form.

And so we see that it too is poetical. Each of these four portraits is a portrait in drawn and selective imagery, both of the corporate, our collective sense, and of our individual sense of the condition of man before God.

Here, this evening, is the portrait of illness, an image of infirmity.

It's an image of an individual or of persons who are afflicted with bodily symptoms. It is an image that our Lord himself used in Mark's gospel. He that is well has no need of a physician.

He that is sick has need of a physician. He that is a person of a physician. He that is a person of a physician. The four portraits are a reminder of the phrase from the prayer of general intercession.

[6 : 40] For those in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity. To the medical mind, the anatomy of this illness is relatively complete.

There is, as we read, a very certain diagnosis. There is even what we call an etiological diagnosis, for the cause of this illness is also clearly revealed as well.

It is attributable, we read, to an attitude of heart and mind. To what the psalmist calls foolishness.

Disregard, perhaps, for God. There are two readings of the psalm, as you will have known in your own study. But whether you read the sick man or the fool, it is clear that this man or these people are ill because of that particular kind of foolishness.

The scriptures, in passing, as you will know, are not encyclopedic about the matter of human illness. Some illnesses came as direct punishments, as the plagues, for instance.

[8 : 21] Some are the inevitable consequence of natural events. Some occur in moral innocence.

Some occur in moral innocence, completely, as in the case of the boy born blind. Some become the crucible of personal loyalty and devotion to God, as in the illness of Job.

But in any case, in the light of scripture, all form an arena for God's might and God's mercy.

There is here, too, a very complete symptomatology of an illness. Verse 18, we read that their soul abhors all manner of meat.

Anorexia. Loss of appetite. Loss, in a bodily sense, of the very thing that leads one to food and to nourishment and to the possibility of recovery.

[9 : 39] But the end stage of anorexia is actual revulsion for food, so that the soul abhors all manner of meat.

And so, appetite itself has fallen prey to the illness. But here, the very soul has lost the taste.

For the bread of life. And therefore, for life itself. How often do we encounter in ourselves or in those with whom we would share the bread that another beggar has found, how often do we encounter an actual revulsion for that which alone can nourish and sustain and heal?

There is a graphic description of the experience called to mind are all of our own experiences of illness.

the imperceptible transition from mere fatigue to actual loss of function.

[11 : 09] the progress through lassitude and the loss of appetite perhaps a particular symptom of your own memory perhaps it is pain on swallowing that results in a loss of ability to eat.

There is then the sense of the further fear or the further the loss of further of the fear of further loss and the fear of the loss of all of life itself.

We are reminded of the psalmist language in another place the pains of hell get hold upon me.

Perhaps in the end the fear of loss is replaced by the fear that death will not overtake one but that this illness will be prolonged indefinitely.

And so in the midst of life as with these people who are described in their affliction we are in death and so each illness prefigures death as well and brings its power into view.

And to conclude in this anatomy of an illness there is a prognosis as well. There is to this particular illness an inevitable future.

[12 : 51] Because while in some sense all illness prefigures death this one is fatal from the beginning. This affliction is mortal.

It is an illness unto death. And here the victims at the point of intervention are at the very gates of death itself.

there is however treatment and as we shall see it takes an unexpected form.

There is a general literal sense in which commentators have interpreted Psalm 107 but in a very general sense it would seem in these four portraits that there is something about the very nature of human life itself.

That human life has been so constituted organically so structured as to ensure that at one point or another there will be a cry.

[14 : 10] Something that is literally and uncontrollably wrung from us. An ejaculatory prayer that comes from the very core of our creatureliness.

And so it is sometimes in human illness. But that is not the particular sense in which this Psalm speaks of affliction or illness.

It is rather as we have said a metaphor a word picture an image of illness. We've seen what each of these four portraits have in common.

We might take a moment just now to look at two interesting aspects in which this one differs from the others. In the first place the experience of illness lends itself to the illumination of solitariness.

To the isolation induced by illness. if the wanderers and the prisoners and the storm-tossed seafarers are in some sense in it together then there is a sense in which they are not that the sick man is ultimately alone.

[15 : 47] In the second place the focus the focus here when one is looking at the work of God in the life of the individual is not upon the mighty and visible and public acts of deliverance not upon the works of God but rather upon the word of God.

the word of God not in this sense spoken but in this remarkable verb sent.

One reading of the Hebrew is in the present tense he sends forth his word and heals them and delivers them. This illness is a soul sickness.

Sin is a heart condition. Original sin is a congenital heart condition. Congenital heart disease.

This is another way of holding in view that the illness described involves the whole of one's being. It is all pervasive.

[17 : 15] And so in the same way that a polluting stream contaminates the entire body of water into which it flows so that no droplet of that body is eventually spared.

So it is with this illness. The whole body is sick and sick unto death now well beyond the reach of prevention and well beyond the reach of any minor remedy.

symptoms if some of the symptoms are eventually physical then that should not surprise us for we are our bodies.

They are all we have in experience. and if you reach out to touch someone in illness that is the only vehicle you can touch.

Our bodies are the only vehicle of our experience and the only expression of our lives that we are given. I confess freely that I find it remarkable to reflect on how long it has taken me to come to grips with this and to life within my own body, the body that I am.

[18 : 52] Is there physic for such affliction? Is there a cure for this condition? The clear disclosure of this passage is that there is curiously and in a way that may seem disappointing or even offensive to the ears of twentieth century expectancy, the prescription is a word.

Verse 20, he sends forth his word and heals them. The parched lips that cried out to God find, perhaps to their amazement, that their words have reached one who himself speaks and who replies.

is a man. I'm reminded in closing of the poignant words of Jairus, that good man whose daughter lay dying on her little bed at home.

He went out to meet Jesus to ask him to heal her. And when Jesus offered to go with him, he said, Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof.

Only speak the word, and my daughter will be healed. In a way that I find quite moving and quite fitting, that word of Jairus has found its way into the liturgy of Roman Catholic Mass.

[21 : 06] Lord, only speak the word, and I shall be healed. The word of God. In the beginning was the word.

The word was with God. The word was God. God. But how can such a word, such powerful logotherapy, be applied to the life of man in his flesh?

That word became flesh and dwelt among us. hear the word of God.

Ask you to pick up your place. You may have something. There you go.

We're looking at Psalm 107 at the third of the four pictures, and Harley Smyte has sort of given you a breakdown of a kind of medical diagnosis, a clinical look at the patient as seen in the scriptures here.

[22 : 59] And I want to carry on briefly about it and to tell you a little bit in this particular way.

This summer, or I guess it was this past summer, news broke of Rock Hudson's disease that he had AIDS.

And apparently it's done great things for the public attitude towards this particular illness, because now that somebody very famous and very well-known and very much respected and loved by many people, after a long and eminent career in the movies, disease, that he should have contracted such a disease, gave the disease a good deal of respectability that it didn't have beforehand. men. And it was interesting that the magazine Christianity Today wrote up the whole story of the discovery of his disease, the public announcement of the nature of his disease, the attempts that were made to find some kind of healing, and the inevitable, apparently inevitable consummation of the disease in his death.

and Christianity Today said the way that it was treated was very peculiar, and they said that it was a tragedy without a tragic flaw in the character, that it represented hopes for remission of disease, but no prayers for remission of sin, that there was fear without any phobia, that there was danger

without wrongdoing, that it was a no-fault scandal, and that it ended up in a kind of technological sanctification of the man himself.

[25 : 19] problem. And what the magazine was attempting to do was to point out the way the media had treated the disease and the consequences of the disease without ever mentioning the spiritual dimensions of the problem.

Now, when you come to the Psalms, the situation is quite different, because I suppose when that was written, the mystery was the physical symptoms which weren't understood, but the spiritual genesis of the disease and consequence and symbolism of the disease was probably far better understood than we understand it.

And that's why when you turn to the passage, you begin to see what happens. Some were sick through their sinful ways and some are fools.

Now, one of the commentaries points out that this foolishness was not the foolishness of a lack of intelligence, but the foolishness which was pure perversity.

That's what the source of the problem was. The illness was self-inflicted. The fool is described as the one who picks up what we spoke about last night.

[27 : 01] He is the one who rebels against the word of God and spurns the counsel of the Most High. Well, this is disease.

The fundamental disease of man is thin. That somehow it's been a part of us and our inability to acknowledge that it's a part of us is one of the really outstanding characteristics of human personality.

the inability to identify this, the kind of no fault scandal of sin in our lives.

Now, the fact of the matter is that this sickness is not something which afflicts people in a particular in a particular virus or a particular bacterial infection or a particular breakdown in the physical functions of the body.

This illness is something which is much more closely related to the spiritual reality and the spiritual reality emerges from the foolishness, the franticness that we engage in in our attempt to escape from this pervasive condition so that all of us are in this sense I don't know whether I should say it this way but I think it is in fact that we are profoundly sick and not aware of it in large measure because of our unwillingness to acknowledge it.

[29 : 11] And the effect of this psalm as in many other psalms is that it traces the reality of this deep into the center of our own personality.

And so that what almost inevitably happens in the matter of sickness is that it is associated with guilt because we know that somehow we ourselves have contributed to it.

And we have it's almost inescapable when you are ill that in some way you have the sense of being responsible. And I suppose that that's what is being spoken of here when it says some were sick through their sinful ways and because of their iniquities suffered this affliction.

Well, I guess we don't know very much about what it means to be well. A friend of mine who was a psychiatrist said that doctors can go on endlessly diagnosing disease and the various symptoms that accompany it.

It's almost impossible for them to describe what being well means. It's a very difficult thing to do because I suppose because of the complexity of human beings.

[30 : 48] But I was reading a commentary on this kind of thing by John Stock in a book that he wrote and he talked about a disease which I'm very much aware of, a kind of self-inflicted disease which I suspect many of you know about too.

And it relates to watching television. And the symptoms of it, he says, are that we become physically lazy because it inhibits personal participation.

The whole country watches the Grey Cup game but haven't got enough energy to walk around the block. The excitement all derives from their relationship to watching other people being physically active and in some sense entering into that.

He goes on to say that another symptom of the same disease is that we become, through watching television, through the media, we become intellectually uncritical.

People want simply to flop and not think. When you reach a certain nadir of fatigue and stress, you simply go home and you switch your button to the off position and the television to the on position and there you are in a state of stupor for several hours.

[32 : 23] sense. And that creates the symptom of being intellectually totally uncritical. If you had any life in yourself, you would find yourself totally intolerant of what that machine does to you, but instead you submit to being intellectually uncritical.

the third symptom of the disease, John Stott points out, is that you become emotionally insensitive. You can permanently damage, he says, the machinery of emotional reaction.

I have been to a movie with my son David and one of those Indiana Jones movies and I am utterly horrified by them.

I haven't been to that many movies in my life. It wasn't considered a good thing to do when I was young. Besides, it was expensive. It used to cost 15 cents. And you but the funny thing was that I realized after going to Star Wars movies with him and to things like the Indiana Jones movies, that I was totally caught up in the sheer horror of what was happening.

And he was fascinated by how they created the theatrical effects. There wasn't any emotion in it for him at all. It was just a totally different kind of reaction.

[34 : 04] But there's no doubt that you can become emotionally very insensitive. You can become morally disordering.

And John points out and he said that what happens is that you learn a kind of normative of behavior which is physical violence is admissible when provoked, sexual promiscuity is permissible when aroused, extravagant consumer expenditure when tempted.

All these are accepted as normal moral standards in our Western society. and it isn't done by any conscious decision.

It's done by some pervasive and subconscious impact on our minds of the unreality that we are gluing our minds to when we watch television.

I am being very negative on television and I am prepared to admit that there are many advantages to it and it's done a great deal for us in some ways.

[35 : 25] But I'm trying to show as John Stott does in this thing where the thing tends to break down.

It seems peculiarly appropriate that I should be talking about illness. I highly personal experience but I the one thing I rejoice in though is that I'm not nearly as sick as some of you think I am.

The final symptom of this illness, an illness which all of us experience, is we become psychologically confused.

That is, physically lazy, intellectually uncritical, emotionally insensitive, morally disordered, and psychologically confused.

And when explaining this, what John Stott points out is that the media provide a kind of fantasy about what reality is.

[36 : 55] You live in a world where there is, in fact, no meaning to who you are. As the television goes on and on and on, your whole personality seeps out of you, out and out and out, until after an hour or two hours, you are nothing but a meaningless, non-directed blob of protoplasm sitting there waiting for somebody to come and shovel you off the chair.

That takes place, and that kind of psychological confusion is because your life has lost all reality. You die in front of a television set. You become someone who is like, we think about the reality of here and wonder if there's any ghosts around.

You, in fact, become a ghost, and the television becomes the only reality that remains. And you're caught with that.

well, he ends up by pointing out that in this illness, this illness with which we are all very much afflicted, and which we're all very much aware of, we lose any sense of the reality of the church of Jesus Christ, any sense, and he contrasts it finally with the person of Jesus Christ.

[38 : 36] That machine which robs you of life and of reality, which does all this damage to you, physically, intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, and morally, that machine which does all that to you, robs you of life, while the encounter with Jesus Christ is the thing that pours life and healing into you, because the encounter with Jesus Christ is a reality.

It is the most profound reality up against which we will ever come in the course of our lives. That is the eternal reality of the risen Son of God.

And so the church is the place in which healing takes place. It takes place, I think, in three ways.

The first way that it takes place is that, and I should say that all three of these ways of healing in the church are the result of the activity of the grace of God.

Remember that these words that appear again and again and again in Psalm 107 is, these words are, then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress. And Harley described to you and to all of us how this affliction is unto death. It's a death experience. And that's described when you come to that point, you are, that a cry is wrenched out of you. [40 : 27] You cry to the Lord in your distress and he hears you and delivers you from your affliction. Now, the important point about that transaction is that even though the sickness, the foolishness, which is the result of our human perversity, takes hold of our lives and grabs us so that we can't escape, in spite of that fact, the grace of God is still at work.

In other words, where there is no deserving on our side, where there is nothing but actual guilt which results from perversity, that doesn't in any way inhibit the grace of God. The principle which Paul enunciates in the epistle to the Romans is, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. While he says we were in blood to our elbows, with our own guilt, Christ died for us, that he has acted in grace towards us. Now, the three ways I think in which this works out is, first, there is, the church is to be the vehicle of this grace of God.

What we offer to you tonight is the grace of God in Jesus Christ. People cannot understand that, because they really think that somehow they have deserved what's happened to them, and so they must be punished for what's happened to them.

[42 : 16] And some of them, in their perversity, set out to punish themselves for what's happened. And they may even want to be punished, because they feel that they are responsible, and the grace of God breaks in on them and offers them this word which heals.

The same word by which God created the universe is the word which spoken to you in Jesus Christ becomes a word of healing.

The church then, secondly, is a body where healing is to take place. You see, we have a highly structured system where when you're sick, you go to the doctor. But the fact of the matter is that some of the basic healing that we require may in fact be available to us from the person sitting beside us or behind us or in front of us in the congregation of Christ's church.

We can be the means of healing one to another. And that's how the church is supposed to work. [43 : 42] A lady, a lady of great dignity who lost her husband, came to church here on a Sunday morning at eight o'clock and complained quite bitterly to me afterwards, but she found she couldn't cry when she was in church.

And it wasn't that she didn't want to cry, it's just that it was unacceptable to cry in church. And so she found that even coming here, she had to keep up a front.

And in keeping up that front, she, in a sense, contributed to the failure of the church.

The church as a community of people is a place where I think you are allowed to cry, to cry out to God for help, to confess your need, to confess your guilt, to confess your failure, to confess your perversity.

the reason that alcoholics can confess their alcoholism to other alcoholics is because they're all in the same boat.

[45 : 10] The reasons Christians can confess their sins one to another and are instructed to do so is because we are all in the same boat.

And we can hear that from one another. And in hearing it can be part of the process healing. Third thing that I think a church does which is difficult and that is clergymen tend to become the answer to people's problems.

people want to see you privately, they want to talk to you privately, they want to tell you their problems privately, and they want you privately to be the answer to their problem.

And because they desperately want to try and be the answer to your problem, they try to be what they can't be, while you try to make them what they aren't.

and a totally artificial relationship is built up because the ministry which belongs between a man and Jesus Christ is interfered with by the relationship between a man and a minister who's trying to do what he can't do because the man is trying to make him do what he ought to know he can't do.

[46 : 30] and you get caught in this relationship all the time and dependence upon the clergy to do what they can't do and the futility of the clergy trying to do what they know they can't do robs us of that relationship to Jesus Christ which is to be the healing relationship in our lives.

and I know a lot of people want to go into the ministry to get caught in that particular trap for some reason and yet I come across all sorts of people who say that the church has failed it and if you ask them why it's because the minister didn't prove to be what they wanted him to be and he tried to but he failed.

and the church is to be the place where we minister to one another but primarily where you are required to come into such a relationship to Jesus Christ as the word of God that your healing will derive from that relationship that Jesus is the word of God to you and Jesus is the one who will hear your cross and who will redeem you so that the picture in the psalm is then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress.

and that's exactly what needs to happen even in the perversity of our self-inflicted illnesses is that we cry to the Lord and he redeems them.

His redemption is not the simple redemption which there is from probably our the breakdown of our physical being but his redemption is total and eternal and he is the one that shares his risen life with us and becomes for us the ultimate healing that we need.

[49 : 01] will you sing with me now hymn number 48 in the blue book? and versept It is quite true that doctors are not much given to understanding wellness.

Not very good perhaps at describing what it means to feel well. That's possibly because they are not called upon very often to share their own experience of healing or of feeling well.

And I draw upon my own awareness of illness and of healing to try and draw another word picture of it for you.

Ancient physicians used to speak of the crisis of an illness, particularly for example of the moment when an illness might go one way or the other.

The kind of event about which pictures were painted, the doctor waking overnight for the turning point for the illness.

[51 : 01] There is that time in an illness, a turning point, sometimes after a night of sleep.

A sense sometimes of slowly quickening power. A sense of gathering again of strength.

There is even sometimes in the morning the semi-ecstasy of the recognition that the pain of yesterday the person has now consciously to be remembered, to be appreciated.

The returning edge of energy, the growth of power, dare we say even exaltation.

A physical sense of exaltation in the sheer joy of the return of will. The reversal of that lassitude of which we spoke.

[52 : 15] By this aos, this is better than I felt in days. We all know that experience. This is better than I felt in weeks.

Better than I had ever hoped to feel again. And even is it possible— better than I ever felt before I was sick.

I can remember that experience several times in my life as a tiny child, and later in life as well.

There is an amazing similarity in quality and intensity of that experience as it has recurred through illnesses in my own life, and it too is a picture of something else.

It is that experience which the psalmist records in the final verses of the passage before us.

[53 : 28] But you note he doesn't stop there. He returns to give thanks.

He knows that that experience too was about something else. The same lips that abhorred food, the same lips that in an agonal moment of illness had cried out to God, a last word perhaps before being silenced forever, are now opened amazingly, anew, refreshed, cleansed, and given voice from a heart itself renewed.

The exaltation and physical joy and the outward expression of that is something that is wonderfully portrayed, as you'll remember, in the example of a lame man healed in the third chapter of Acts.

A lame man, who from his mother's womb was lame, was carried, and him they laid daily at the gate of the temple called dutiful.

He, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked alms. Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us.

[55 : 02] Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with the hand of the hand of the hand of the hand of the hand of the hand of the hand of the hand.

Peter said, And Peter said, Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk. Peter said, And he took him by the right hand and

lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength.

And he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered with them into the temple, walking and leaping and praising God.

So the psalmist calls upon the redeemed to say so.

For some of us, we can remember a moment in time when we first said so. But I can say that there have been many other times in one's life when it has been necessary to say thank you again, for spiritual as well as physical health and strength restored.

[56 : 22] In the face of such sacrifice, as we heard described for us tonight, the psalmist knows only one language of response.

And that, too, is a sacrifice. A sacrifice of praise, of thanksgiving, that is vocal, and that, although it is private at first, is eventually public.

I am deeply grateful, as I said at the beginning, to add my word of sacrifice and thanksgiving once again in this place. in this place.