

Society of Mary: St Catherine's, Burnley: 4th. March 2017
Now is the healing time decreed....James 5. 13-16

I have been involved in the healing ministry all my ordained life - which this year clocks up 36 years.

When I was a curate my parish had the chaplaincy of Walton Hospital in Liverpool- now closed, but which then had something approaching 1200 beds, including a regional neurological centre.

When I took on my first parish in Southport I became chaplain to the local maternity hospital; later becoming the first chaplain at the new Southport and Formby District General. And then when Queenscourt Hospice was built in the hospital grounds, I became Chaplain there as well.

When I moved to St James Haydock as Vicar almost 22 years ago I inherited the world's largest branch of the Guild of St Raphael (which still numbers around 60 members). I was invited to become a member of the Guild Council (possibly because they were frightened of losing 60 subscriptions!). And then - as often happens in institutions if you stay around long enough - around 5 years ago I was invited by our then Warden, Bishop Nicholas Reade, recently retired from Blackburn, to take on the role of Sub-Warden of the Guild of St Raphael to replace my illustrious predecessor, Fr Paul Nener, who is, of course, our 2nd Speaker today.

In this first Address I want us to think mainly about what might be called the 'practical' side of the Church's ministry of Healing - what *we all* can do, and how we can go about doing it.

The words from St James' Epistle, are probably the most familiar bit of scripture to those who have, or have had, any involvement in the healing ministry. They not only give us a scriptural rationale - but they also give us directions as to how to go about it. (*'If anyone is sick, let him call for the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord'* - the mandate for the Sacrament of Anointing.)

And this is what Christians have been doing for almost 2000 years. Thank God - literally - the ministry of anointing has gained more and more acceptance in recent years - and not just by those who we might say were of 'our tradition'. I was called out to one of our nursing homes one night recently. A faithful lady aged 97 was peacefully drawing to the end of her earthly life. Her daughter - herself in her 70's, and a woman full of faith - informed me that she had already anointed her mother with oil. She was - or rather is - a member of a neighbouring Church in Haydock, which would certainly not be of 'our tradition' - But this outward expression of God's

anointing love for her mother was very important to her. I have to say, that being a dyed in the wool Catholic, I did it again! (tactfully, I hope...).

But that's not really the point.

The point is that that woman's daughter recognised the sacramental power of the physical act of anointing her mother - though perhaps she wouldn't express it in that way - but so what.

Standing by the bedside of her dying mother, she could do no more for her than fulfil the words of James. She also called for one of the 'elders of the Church' - (who, by the way, became one year elder on Valentine's Day). She put her faith into practical expression: she did what she could do. She did not expect to 'cure' her mother, but her outward expression of faith and trust went a long way to 'healing' her mother - and I would say, herself - at that difficult and emotional time.

In my years as a hospital chaplain, I saw many examples of people leaving hospital outwardly 'cured' but not 'healed'. And I was always amazed at how many people - when confined to a hospital bed - wanted to talk about the things which troubled them most; and it was often not what had put them into hospital in the first place.

But you don't have to be a hospital chaplain to fulfil that sort of ministry -

put simply as the 'ministry of listening'. But, of course, the true fulfilment of that sort of ministry is knowing not just '*how*' to listen, but also '*when*' to speak.

Hospitals can be pretty lonely places - but then so can busy shopping centres, housing estates, and even Churches. There's nothing so lonely as being 'alone' in a crowded room, or a stranger in a church where no one speaks to you. A simple word of welcome can go a long way to being a 'healing word' for someone who has taken a first tentative step into our churches. But please don't force them to join the choir, fill in an Electoral Roll Form, or help run the Monday Bingo after their first visit!

The ministry of welcome, of hospitality, and of care, is a ministry in which we all have our part to play - and all these are ministries of healing; when we acknowledge the dignity, the uniqueness, and the value of 'the other' as a fellow pilgrim on the journey of faith we share together.

In our healing acts towards others, the greatest miracle is often the healing of ourselves.