

THE MINISTRY OF HEALING

JAMES 5 v 13-15

Are any of you in trouble? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you ill? You should send for the church elders, who will pray for them and rub olive oil on them in the name of the Lord. This prayer made in faith will heal the sick; the Lord will restore them to health, and the sins they have committed will be forgiven.

One of the privileges I have as a parish minister is to provide pastoral care to the members of my congregations. A man once asked me how many members I have in my church (churches). I haven't done an exact count, but if I include all the children, it is well over four hundred. The pastoral charge of St Andrew's in Canberra, where I serve as minister, is typical of most congregations in terms of its diversity of needs. So much of my time as a minister is spent with people, mainly elderly people, who are sick, either at home or in hospital. I often get a phone call from a relative of a sick member, requesting me to make a pastoral visit. One of the things I always do is to pray for the person at the end of my visit. Praying for my parishioners is one of the most important things that I do as a minister. In most cases I ask the Lord to heal the person, but there are times, if it is clear that healing is not a realistic possibility, when I pray that the Lord will grant his grace and strength to the person. I can recall visiting an elderly lady in an aged care facility. Her family informed me that she was dying. Just before I went on holiday, I had a Home Communion service with her. I was sure it would be the last time I would see her. When I returned from holiday two weeks later, I heard that she was still alive. On resuming my pastoral duties, I visited her again and discovered that she was making a remarkable improvement. I read from Psalm 4 and then prayed with her. At most services in church there is a prayer of intercession sometimes called a pastoral prayer. Much of the content of the intercessions or pastoral prayers is taken up with praying for the sick, sometimes by name, sometimes anonymously. Some churches, particularly those who have many elderly members, are strong in the area of pastoral care. Some of the members of my congregation were involved in local hospitals as pastoral care visitors. (Sadly this effective ministry has had to stop because of COVID restrictions).

I mention all this to highlight the fact that healing is a vital part of the church's ministry. James, as he draws towards the end of his letter, suddenly introduces the subject of healing; James 5 v 13-15. James says that if we're in trouble we should pray; v 13a. By way of contrast, he also says that if we're happy we should sing songs of praise; v 13b. We all experience these contrasting feelings of happiness and sickness. A typical congregation is full of them.

James goes on to bring up the reality of sickness; v 14. It's interesting that he didn't suggest that the sick people pray to the Lord immediately for healing. He says that they should call on the elders of the church to come and pray with them. The elders were the spiritual leaders in the church. In our context

today that includes the minister/pastor/rector/priest of the church. The elders anointed the sick person with oil and prayed over them. The subject of healing in the church is huge and we can only briefly comment on it in this study. The Church in the Reformed Tradition has been divided on the issues surrounding healing which I feel is most unfortunate. It is my view that healing continues to be a vital ministry in the life of the church. At the Alpha Course retreats in my church the ministry of healing is exercised. On one occasion I was prayed for by others and a neck strain I had at the time was healed.

The reality is people get sick. Getting sick is part of being human. All of us get sick at times. Some people get very sick and have to spend long periods of time in hospital. The Lord is capable of healing people without any human intervention, but he chooses to use human agents. This emphasises the place of the church community. The congregation has a role to play which is to intercede i.e. stand in the gap between the sick person and the Lord.

When you are sick or hurting physically or emotionally, don't hide it from others in the congregation or fellowship that you are part of. Some of us are very private people; we tend to keep things to ourselves. In the course of my ministry, I find this can be frustrating because I am denied the opportunity to offer help. James says; "Call on the elders to pray". As a Christian, don't face sickness on your own. Don't retreat into yourself. Your pain can be shared with your elder, your minister and other church members. James suggests anointing with oil. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, he tells us that the Good Samaritan stopped to help the man at the roadside who had been robbed and beaten "*He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine*: Luke 10 v 34a. Oil is a symbol of spiritual and medical resources.

James brings in a spiritual dimension; v 15. Sometimes sin and sickness are linked. Maybe you need to be spiritually healed. The ministry of healing is a vital part of the church's life. I would strongly encourage you to use it when you are sick.