

Prelude: Minuet from Berenice by Handel played on the Laggan organ by Alan Buchan

Words of welcome

To live a full and balanced life, it is good to take time from the duties and occupations of every day and spend time raising our eyes to look to God, the source of our life and of all good things.

Hymn I to the hills will lift mine eyes

Prayer:

Lord God, as the trees around us shed their leaves so that we can see even more of the surrounding hills, we lift our eyes, not only to the most majestic parts of your creation, but to you yourself. We lift our eyes to look to you, the maker of all, who are our only help. We lift our eyes to you, remembering your steadfastness, which is greater than the hills, and your strength, which is found not in rigidity but in movement. We lift our eyes to you; and find that you are not remote and far away, but constantly with us, where we are, in all the intimate moments of our lives.

Lord God, you came in Jesus to show how close to us you like to be, to show us how we can be close to you as well, despite being part of your creation with limits of understanding. And so we worship you. We worship you for bringing your light and love to our lives, for bringing healing of our souls and our bodies, and for not making the distinction. We worship you that in Jesus and by your Spirit you forgive and heal us and make us whole.

So hear us now as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

Reading: Mark 3:7-19

Here we have Jesus doing his day to day work. In other episodes in the Gospel we hear of individuals who have interactions with Jesus and learn a small bit of their stories, but in this section, we have an overview of what was going on in Jesus' ministry at this time.

Jesus is in Galilee. The "sea" referred to is not the Mediterranean but the much smaller sea of Galilee, which, being freshwater, is really a large lake! Jesus is there by the shore, where he can get away into a boat if the crowd gets too large and pushing. Because by now he is expecting and getting a crowd. The Gospel lists where they have come from, and this is where you might want to see what your Bible can do in the way of maps, which most editions put at the very end, after the last page of Revelation. If you have a map that shows Palestine in the time of Christ, you will see that Galilee, which is an administrative district as well as a body of water, is near the north of the country and of course people have come from there. But they have also come from Judea, which is the land to the south and includes Jerusalem, the capital. In days of travel by foot or horse, that was a bit of a journey. But they have come from even further: from Idumea, which is to the south of Jerusalem, and would mean a trip of more than a hundred miles. And they have come from beyond the Jordan and from Tyre and Sidon. Both of these regions are places where people who were not Jews might be found, as they were border areas. Beyond the Jordan was to the West of Galilee –

as the Jordan flows through the sea of Galilee – and Tyre and Sidon are coastal areas to the north east. They have come literally from all the corners of Palestine and a little bit beyond.

They came and they pressed in on Jesus for healing, so much so that he had a boat ready to hop into. And the healing that is highlighted is casting out of unclean spirits, or demons.

This was a major part of Jesus daily work just now. We can see that because when out of the larger crowd of disciples he calls twelve to be an inner circle and be known as apostles – those who are sent – one of the things that they are specifically sent to do is to cast out these unclean spirits.

The unclean spirits were a problem for Jesus, because word had gone round that the way to get his goat was to call him the Messiah or the Son of God. Had it gone round some hidden spiritual grapevine, or had it gone round those who were troubled in their minds? It doesn't matter: the fact is that Jesus really didn't want this accolade from this source – or maybe from any source at this time. He wanted his life and his words to show and tell who he was and what he was about, not have labels attached to him, which would generate expectations, and hinder people looking and listening and drawing their own conclusions. And maybe we should pause there and wonder if the Church, by its creeds and by its theological formulations has quashed some of this “Come and see and draw your own conclusions” atmosphere which Jesus tried to foster.

The unclean spirits were a problem for Jesus, but of course they were a problem for everyone: for those who manifested them and for society. And by unclean spirit I don't think that the Gospel writers are referring to Hammer Horror film types of possession. Or very rarely – as rarely as you and I might encounter such a phenomenon.

No, unclean spirits were then and are now found in people whose lives are dominated by brokenness. All of us know difficulties and have times of brokenness in our lives, but some of us are dominated by such times. They are people who cannot get life in perspective because one aspect of life is always to the fore in their minds and can't be put in its right place. They are obsessives of many kinds: people obsessed by health or by fears or by one political idea or by some difficult happening in their past from which they cannot move on. They were then as they are now, people who suffer from depression and other mental illnesses, some of which might make them act irrationally. They were and are people who you might think twice about asking “How are you?” because you don't really want to hear the same story all over again.

Jesus wouldn't take glib or fawning praises from such people, not because he did not care for them, but because he did. He cared enough to cure them, to restore them to fullness of life, to re-balance their lives and loves and expectations, and to heal their pasts in the way that they were affecting their present. And the apostles were given the authority to do this as well. They watched and learned and then were sent out to do the same as their master. This was what it was going to mean to fish for people, as Peter and his friends had been promised: it was going to mean fishing for the whole person from amid the wreckage of a life or a personality.

Hymn Christ's is the world in which we move

Reading: James 5:13-20

In these closing sentences of the letter of James, we are given a glimpse of what was normal practice in the emerging church of the first century when it came to praying for one another and asking for healing. And one of the notable things that we see is that healing of the body is linked with healing of the soul or the mind, as those who are sick are recommended

seeking prayer from the elders of the church but also everyone is told to confess their sins to one another and pray for one another. For James, and presumably for his first readers, the two things were sides of the same coin, not different parts of life.

And how right they were! I am not saying that physical illness is all caused by spiritual or psychological difficulties, of course not: we know a lot about transmission of infection that wasn't known two thousand years ago. And we know about environmental factors which can lead to all kinds of illness, from cholera and typhoid to cancer and heart disease. Many illnesses are purely physical in their origin.

But not in their effects. Physical illness can have a profound effect on the mind, and on the soul. Being ill, even with just a cold, can lead to you feeling low, even depressed. And it can have a detrimental effect on the life of the soul, which is the inner person, leading to low self-worth, to dwelling on past failures and other unclean spirits. And since Jesus came to bring wholeness to people, and balance, and life and order, so we should ask for specific prayers when we are physically ill – and so often we do not ask, even if we would value them, because we don't want to be a bother, or don't want to appear weak or for other reasons. And we should adopt practices which will help us to keep a watch on our inner self.

When James says to confess our sins to one another, he almost certainly is not talking about large group confessions, where everyone knows all about the inner life of each. But there is a real place Christian life, for small groups, of no more than two or three – maybe four – who hold each other mutually accountable for their inner life, and who commit to praying regularly and in detail for each other and with each other.

What James is talking about in this passage is people being brought back from all kinds of infirmity – he does not make a distinction – to wholeness and a right relationship with God, with each other and within themselves. Prayer is a large part of it, but so is confession – admitting you need prayer, whether for physical or spiritual ailments. In this time when we are not meeting in larger formal groups on a Sunday morning, maybe some of us – all of us! – could take the time to develop spiritual friendships. You don't need to be able to meet in person to do this – a phone call is a great thing. You certainly don't need the minister to be part of your soul friendship group or pairing. Maybe we will find real healing of body and of mind and of soul if we will make the effort, and the first step, and ask someone we trust to pray for us. And offer to pray for them.

Unclean spirits are still around us: not in gothic horror, but in unbalanced lives, which are held back from being all that they were created to be. When the church remembers that we are given authority to deal with this, that we are set free to live in fullness of life, that forgiveness and healing are in God's gifts for us to give to each other; when the church remembers that and acts on it, then the watching world will know that we have Christ among us, and that the difference that makes which is free is also priceless.

Hymn We cannot measure how you heal

Prayer

Lord God, we cannot measure how you heal, because there are things in this world which defy our habit of calculation and evaluation. But we do know that we are part of a world that needs healing and which Jesus came and died for so that such healing could be found.

And so today we bring to you the brokenness and unclean spirits that need your touch. We bring you the spirits of discontent and division which are so prevalent in our world, to divide people from each other, and to pit people against one another. We pray for your love and justice, to be known and for all that unites us as your children to be more important than

anything that divides us. Help us to see difference as delightful and as part of the variety of life and not as a matter of fear or competition.

We bring to you the spirit of pride which too often prevents people from seeking the help that they need, asking that knowing ourselves to be your children equally, we might be able to live as family.

We pray for all the brokenness which blights lives – our lives or the lives of those we know. We pray that you will bring healing to past hurts, and that as people learn to see themselves as your beloved children, everything else, past or present or what might yet happen in the future would find its true perspective; we pray that the delight of knowing ourselves loved by you and accepted and called and chosen might far outweigh any other matter which seeks to dominate our lives.

We pray too for those we know who are physically ill, with illness of the body or the mind or that has to do with the encroachments of age. May your healing hand touch them to bring them your wholeness, in whatever way is best.

We pray for the healing of the world as we seek to cope with the Covid pandemic, praying especially for our friends in the Czech Republic who are finding life very restricted and frightening again. In this time of trial may your healing touch inspire us to work together and love one another.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Hymn We lay our broken world

Benediction:

May the grace, mercy, and peace of God
touch your heart and soul with his healing.

And may the blessing of God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.

Postlude: "Postlude" by Justin Knecht played by John Crombie on the Kingussie organ