

## Prayers for the Sick

THE question of Spiritual Healing and the Church's attitude towards it is one which in modern days has come again into prominence.

A large part of each Gospel is taken up with narratives recording the healing of the sick. We notice that our Lord never refused, nor failed, to cure any sick person who came to Him. S. Luke tells us that 'He laid His hands on every one of them, and healed them' (iv. 40). S. Mark tells us that 'He healed many that were sick of divers diseases' (i. 34), and then, after recording His visit and rejection at Nazareth, he adds 'He could there do no mighty work save that He laid His hands on a few sick folk, and healed them' (vi. 5). There had to be a certain 'looking unto Jesus' before His healing powers could be effective. Against unbelief He was powerless. Nevertheless we may still say that Jesus healed all the sick folk *who came to Him in search of healing*, i.e., in faith, believing. He might demand faith on the part of the recipient, but He Himself was able to awaken that faith, and whoever came to Him in loving trust received the boon of health which He seemed able to give. Even faith by proxy secured His healing gift.

Our Lord, however, never used His miracles as a means of convincing the common people or of demonstrating that He was the Son of God. The healing was done for its own sake; it was an end in itself. Sickness and disease were regarded as part of the kingdom of evil with which He was at war.

Christ's commission to His disciples was 'to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick' (S. Luke ix. 2, cp. S. Matt. x. 7, 8a). The text that follows in S. Matthew, 'Freely ye have received, freely give', refers to the powers of healing which He freely conferred upon His disciples. (It has no reference to the giving of collections!). This commission the early Church endeavoured faithfully to carry out, apparently with considerable success (Acts iii., iv., S. James v. 14-16). If the usual ending of S. Mark's Gospel is regarded as a later addition it can be taken as evidence of Christian experience after the end of the first century A.D. 'They shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover' (S. Mark xvi. 18).

The real attitude of the Church to spiritual healing may be gauged more accurately from a study of its liturgies rather than from the impossible task of sifting stories of miracles, cures and wonders, which have ever tended to multiply in ecclesiastical circles.

One of the early liturgies, *the Testament of Our Lord*, (circa 350 A.D.), contains the following prayer :

' O Lord God, who hast bestowed Thy Spirit upon us, O Christ, who didst sanctify us, who are the healer of every sickness and of every suffering, who didst give the gift of healing to those who were accounted worthy of this by Thee, send on this oil the delivering power of Thy good compassion, that it may deliver those who labour, and heal those who are sick, and sanctify those who return when they approach to Thy faith . . . '

In a ritual compiled by S. Gregory, Bishop of Rome (590-604 A.D.), the oil is consecrated as ' a means of protection for mind and body, for getting rid of all pains, all illnesses, all sickness of the body . . . ' Up to about the seventh century A.D. the Church accepted Christ's original command to ' heal the sick ' in its literal significance, and endeavoured to carry it out in a literal sense through her duly ordained ministry. In the intercessory prayers of the Eucharist the elements are frequently regarded as a possible means of healing of body and soul.

The Liturgy of S. Chrysostom contains the sentence :

' Let not, O Lord, the communion of Thy holy mysteries be to my judgement and condemnation, but to the healing of my soul and body '.

In the liturgy and ritual of the Celtic Church, all of which are not later than the ninth century A.D., there is an office for the visitation of the sick. Prayers for the recovery from sickness are in all these cases unconditional, the sick person being exhorted to perceive the hand of God in his recovery, not in his sickness. After the Norman Conquest, Osmund, Bishop of Salisbury, undertook the revision of the existing English offices. In 1085 A.D. he completed his work. In the Visitation Office an exhortation appears for the first time. It reads :

' Dearly beloved brother, give thanks to Almighty God for all His benefits, patiently and gently bearing the weakness of body which He hath sent upon thee, for if thou endure it humbly, without murmuring, it bringeth the greatest reward and health to thy soul '.

This is an entirely new note. It has dominated the office for the sick in England, and hence in the English language, ever since. It evidently was not until about the

eleventh century that the Church conceived of God as the sender of sickness rather than the bringer of health and cure. The qualifying phrase 'if it be Thy holy will', or its equivalent, in the prayer for the recovery of the sick, is not earlier than the eleventh century, and is never found in the early liturgies.

The will of God is our health. The possibility of disease is in accordance with the will of God, just as the possibility of sin is; but not the sin nor the disease itself. That, clearly, is the teaching of Holy Scripture. The reference, of course, is to disease, not pain. Pain is part of the God-given equipment of nature for the preservation of life.

To the best of my knowledge, no modern prayer-book of the Reformed Church is free from this outlook or idea, that the sickness comes from God. *The Book of Common Prayer*, for example, explicitly states it: 'Wherefore whatsoever your sickness is, know you certainly that it is God's visitation'. The late Principal D. S. Cairns, in *The Faith that Rebels*, remarks: 'Jesus always assumed that disease is part of the kingdom of evil, and never once does He give the slightest sign to the contrary'. And Dr Burnett Rae says: 'If you believe that it is the will of God that you should be anything but healthy and well, that your sickness is God-sent, then, obviously, however much you may develop the spiritual life, its power will not get through to the physical. You have put out the clutch'. That is one fundamental reason for the lack of spiritual healing in the Church to-day—'the clutch is out'.

From such a theological background let us continue the study of the office for the sick in modern prayer books. One of the best, so far as the writer has examined them, is the *Euchologion, A Book of Common Order*, published in many editions by the Church Service Society. The prayers for divine service on the whole are definitely good, the prayer for the healing of the sick being usually made without qualification—'for those in sickness and sorrow, that Thou wouldest heal and comfort them'.

In the first Morning Service, however, the following occurs:

'God of all comfort, we commend to Thy mercy all those whom Thou art pleased to visit with any cross or tribulation; the nations whom Thou dost afflict with famine, pestilence or war . . .';

while in the fifth Morning Service we are asked to pray:

'We remember before Thee, O Lord, our brethren who are tried with sickness, entreating Thee . . . to restore them to health, if it be Thy will'.

In the Office for the Sick itself the first two prayers are definitely good, as is also the service, with responses, which precedes them. The sickness is at one point identified with Satan. In the alternative prayer, however, we are back to the popular theology :

‘ Regard with tender compassion this Thy servant, whom it hath pleased Thee to visit with bodily affliction and disease ’.

When the Holy Communion is administered in the Office for the Sick the following phrase occurs : ‘ Vouchsafe to him in this Holy Communion the medicine of his soul ’. In the early Church it was medicine for soul *and* body.

*Prayers for Divine Service* (1923), issued by authority of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, repeats considerably the prayers of *Euchologion*. In the first prayer of the Office for the Sick, however, the following occurs :

‘ Give him a sure and abiding faith, that he may possess his soul in patience and may bear with submission any further trial that Thou mayest see good to send ’.

Surely this is a travesty of the love of God !

*The Book of Common Order* (1928) authorized by the General Assembly of the (former) United Free Church, has the distinction of having no office for the sick, and no separate prayers for the sick at all. They are simply mentioned in passing in the two morning and evening services provided ; but in the Order of Holy Communion the following occurs :

‘ Grant to the suffering relief, and to the sick, if it please Thee, healing ’.

The present *Book of Common Order* (1940), issued by Authority of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, has, it is true, passages of Holy Scripture to be read to the sick, but no prayers and no Office for the Sick are included in the volume. A special intercession is included for ‘ Physicians, Nurses and Hospitals ’, and one for ‘ the Blind, the Deaf and the Dumb ’, but for the sick as such there is no prayer or office at all. In the ordinary Morning and Evening Services the references are everywhere kept at a minimum, but are at least satisfactory.

The relation of spiritual, mental and physical healing may be briefly mentioned. All healing is due to the action of the *vis medicatrix naturae*. This may be stimulated and helped by physical, mental and spiritual means. Physically,

malignant or diseased tissues can be removed by surgery or other method; treatment and medicine may work wonders on the physical powers of recovery of the patient. Mentally, the natural force within the patient making for health can be stimulated also by proper mental adjustment and mental peace. (This is the sphere of psychology as well as religion). This same force can be stimulated and renewed spiritually. For too long have we been content to attack disease by one of these channels only. Let all combine in this saving work. Let each bring its several contribution, that by united effort the patient may be cured.

This, however, implies the acceptance of the theological outlook that sickness and disease are part of the kingdom of evil, and are quite contrary to the holy will of God—just as sin is. It implies the belief that the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are ever working in the world for the true health and well-being of humanity,—for such is the will of God for men.

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