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Last year our youngest son, Jonny, spent six months working in the Ivory Coast. At one point he ended up in hospital for three days. During those three days he was never alone – members of the family he was staying with remained by his bedside all day and slept in the hospital at night until he was well. When he asked them why they did this they replied: “In Africa when one member of the family is ill, every member of the family is ill; and when one member of the family is healed, every member of the family is healed.” Health in Africa is something interpersonal, something to do with relationships.

Our own cultural view of health is rather different. When the NHS was formed in 1948 the aims were twofold – to reduce suffering and, where possible, to restore function. Health for us has been primarily to do with clinical analysis and the alleviation of physical malfunction. Over the last twenty years that has begun to change with the advent of alternative medicine and the concept of holistic healing. And the Christian Gospel has its own insights to add to that current melting pot of ideas on health and healing. And it is surely no accident that it is the gospel of Luke, the beloved physician, which has particular insights into healing not least

in today's parable of the Good Samaritan. That may raise some eyebrows. Is the Good Samaritan really a parable about healing? Well, recent scholarship suggests that parables are not necessarily making only one, pungent point but can be read as metaphors in very different ways. This came home to me very forcibly last Wednesday when I was presiding at the lunchtime Healing Eucharist in the Lady Chapel. I used some Anglican liturgical material, which unashamedly borrowed ideas from the parable of the Good Samaritan as a model for Christian healing.

So where do we begin in this parable for a Christian view of healing? We are told that the Samaritan, on seeing the man by the roadside stripped and beaten, was moved with pity. Other versions translate the phrase by saying he was "moved with compassion". The catalyst for all the Samaritan did was compassion. What the parable does not tell us is why the Samaritan was so compassionate. But, a URC minister recently gave an imaginative reflection on the parable, which filled in the gaps. Samaritans were a people despised and hated by their Jewish neighbours. As such the Samaritan might well have known what it was to be stripped of his human dignity and mocked; he probably knew what it

was to be assaulted with verbal abuse even if he hadn't experienced a physical beating; and he certainly knew what it was to be left – left as an outsider and rejected for his unorthodox religious views. So when he saw the Jew by the roadside stripped, beaten and left for dead the compassion he felt perhaps came from his own wounds. Compassion means “suffering with” and a Samaritan would have been well-qualified to suffer with this Jew, even though he was an enemy.

But, the compassion of the Samaritan in this parable is not a passive sort of pity. It generates a response. The Samaritan touched the beaten man who was viewed as wholly untouchable by the priest and Levite. The Samaritan touched him as he treated his wounds with soothing oil and wine and bandaged him up to protect and support his battered body. He then went an extra mile and put the man on his donkey and took him to an inn. Again in an imaginative meditation on this parable someone asked what would have happened on that journey? The answer came that the wounded man would have told the Samaritan everything that happened. The Samaritan would have *listened* as the man told his story.

The Jesuit priest Gerard Hughes once said: “The gift of being a good listener is perhaps the most healing gift anyone can possess, for it allows the other to be, enfolds them in a safe place, does not judge or advise them, (but) accepts them as they are...and communicates support at a level deeper than words”. In the context of this parable that analysis of listening is fascinating: “Listening enfolds them in a safe place” – what more would one want having been brutally mugged. And “communicates support at a level deeper than words” – just as the beaten man needed physical support so he needed inner support of mind and heart through compassionate listening.

So there we have the beginnings of a Christian theology of healing. At its root is not scientific detachment but a compassion that identifies with and relates to those in need – an African sort of quality. There is also concern for the human body and no hint of a false spirituality that suggests our bodies are somehow unimportant. But, with that is a concern for the whole person modelled in the ministry of listening. There is, though, one vital element missing in all that has been said so far.

I have talked about compassion as an important catalyst for healing. In the NT the word compassion is only ever used to describe the reaction of Jesus. So Matthew records how when Jesus left Jericho and saw two blind men he had compassion on them and healed them. A few weeks ago the gospel was about Jesus approaching the town of Nain where he saw a widow about to bury her son; he was so moved by compassion that he raised her son to new life. Compassion is part and parcel of the motivation behind Jesus' ministry of healing.

And this has particular nuances in the light of today's parable. Jesus tells of the Samaritan having compassion, *suffering with* the man who was stripped, beaten and left for dead. It is almost a preview of Jesus' own suffering when he is stripped, beaten, abandoned by friends and rejected by enemies as he is nailed to the cross. In one reading of this parable it is Jesus who is the Samaritan, the outcast who is despised by the Jewish establishment and crucified outside the city gates. And if this parable *is* a portrayal of Jesus then it is not, I think, stretching the text too much to see more parallels here. Just as the Samaritan poured oil on the wounded man so Jesus sent his disciples to anoint the sick

with oil, a practice the church has continued for two thousand years. As the Samaritan used wine for healing so Jesus gladdens the hearts of wounded humanity with sacramental wine. And as we pictured the Samaritan listening on that journey to the inn so I was reminded of Jesus on another journey from Jerusalem when he listened to two of his disciples. And as Jesus listened to their sorrow and grief on the Road to Emmaus, they were brought to new life. So it is not surprising that for Christians the name of Jesus became inextricably linked to wholeness of body, mind and spirit. Jesus is the source of healing and wholeness, which only reaches its ultimate fulfilment as we see him face to face beyond death.

But, today's passage ends with a call to each one of us: "Go and do likewise". Each one of us is called to be a channel of Jesus' healing love. However, there is in this parable an element of what we might call cognitive dissonance. The healer in the story is wounded and broken. The Samaritan is wounded by his treatment at the hands of God's people and yet, it seems, it is those very wounds that enlarge compassion and drives him to heal his enemy.

We too are called to heal – to touch the untouchable; to pour oil, if not on wounded bodies, at least on troubled waters; and to listen, sometimes again and again to the same story, in order that people might be healed. The surprise of the parable is that the compassion necessary for this ministry only comes as we ourselves are wounded. That insight turns upside down our sanitised world-view where suffering is always seen as a negative. Often, of course, suffering is destructive but today's gospel suggests that when suffering is embraced with grace, rather than resisted, it can become a way for God to enlarge our capacity for compassion and so use us to heal others in the name of Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord.