

Sermon, Trinity XVI Intercessory Prayer.

After the summer break, it feels a bit like coming back into a war zone. Quite a few of our St Michael's people are ill and others are not able to be at church because they are looking after sick relatives. I know you are practical people and that you will pitch in and do what you can to help – and certainly send cards or have a word over the phone. The main thing we are called to do for those sick or distressed is to pray for them.

We pray with confidence, because God hears our prayers and answers them. This does not mean that every sick person prayed for will recover. As a parish priest I have often had people say to me that they don't believe in prayers for the sick. I remember one telling me: *I prayed constantly for my mother, yet God let her die.* That's sad, and there's no diminishing the sadness. But it's also naïve. We all die sooner or later: that's the human condition.

But you can pray for the sick and sometimes with wonderful results. Some years ago a distinguished pathologist phoned me to enquire about the health of a mutual friend. I told him the bad news that this friend had advanced liver cancer. I recall his chilling words: *That's curtains, then. You don't recover from advanced liver cancer.* Well, now in the 21st century we at St Michael's have been praying for a sick man called Steve Tasker. Steve was in a critical state and not expected to last long. He did after all have lung cancer, cancer of the spine as well as cancer of the liver. Last Friday I got an email from him: he is completely clear of all three types of cancer and back at home. Of course Steve will die one day – let's hope it's a long way off. But that doesn't undermine our gratitude for the recovery he is enjoying at present.

I have been a parish priest now for nearly forty years and I have seen many answers to prayer. I have even seen what many would regard as miracles. When you mention miracles, people get really edgy. Surely we can't – as they're always saying – *in the modern scientific world* – believe that God performs miracles?

Modern people have a sort of confused faith in what they take to be science. They deny miracles and prefer to put their trust in what they call *the laws of nature*. But the belief in laws of nature is every bit as metaphysical as belief in God. How about water into wine? When Our Lord performed that miracle at Cana, he was only doing quickly what God does all the time slowly. C.S. Lewis puts this nicely:

God creates the vine and teaches it to draw water by its roots and with the aid of the sun that water becomes wine. Thus every year God turns water into wine. The Pagans believed wine is created by some finite spirit such as Bacchus. The moderns attribute real and ultimate causality to the chemical and other material phenomena which are all we can observe. Both explanations are unsatisfactory.

Interestingly, Lewis adds:

The miracle of water into wine has only half its effect if it only convinces us that Christ is God. It will have its full effect if whenever we see a vineyard or drink a glass of wine, we remember that here works He who sat at the wedding party in Cana.

But there are deeper reasons for praying for the sick – for praying for anyone in fact whether they are sick or not. When you reach out in prayer for another person, you take your mind off yourself. Whereas the tendency of modern people is to think about themselves all the time. In this they are horribly encouraged by all the newspapers, magazines and TV – all those sickening articles written by thirty-something women (of both sexes) telling us to develop our self esteem and to get in touch with our inner child. Psychological navel gazing. It derives ultimately from Freud and psychoanalysis and it is deadly. At any rate, dwelling on your psychological innards will kill you mentally and spiritually if you persist in it. Think about something else, or somebody, else. You really can take yourself out of yourself.

Based on the materialist illusion, we tend to think that what I call *myself* is something that is bounded by my skin – that I am *this*. That's only partly true. When we reach out to others – in prayer or in everyday conversation on a walk, say, or over a meal, we demonstrate that what I call *I* - the real me – enters and lives in that other person's consciousness. Two persons together: the *I* that is I and the *him* that is him interact and change each other.

Whenever we make contact with another person, between us we make a new situation. We create something new and thus we share in the creativity of God. That is why *how* we deal with the other person is as important as *that* we deal with him. What we do in these relationships is help make the other person's character – his soul, if you like. It's the ultimate responsibility: you are your brother's keeper.

Now there are modern people who have a lot of trouble with the idea of God, but no trouble with the presence of other human beings. These are the people who say they can be *good without God*. Some call themselves humanists. But Christ tells us something much different and far stranger and more wonderful than this. He says that, when we reach out to our neighbour by helping him or by our prayers, we do really meet directly with God. *Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*

Those words of Our Lord are not a figure of speech. He did not mean that what we do to our neighbour is *as if* we had done it to God. The truth is that we meet God in our neighbour, really and truly. When we take ourselves out of ourselves and identify in prayer and sympathy with our neighbour, we enter the life of God himself: this identification with the neighbour, this self-forgetting, self-giving concern for his well-being, is a foretaste of heaven.

It is what heaven is like. To turn from self-absorption to identify with our neighbour is the life of the gospel. It is what Our Lord meant by life eternal. And it is the only real life there is. It is not mere self-abandonment – emptying one's consciousness into the void, as in Buddhism. It is rather deliberately, and quite literally, seeking to place our consciousness within that of our neighbour.

This was put beautifully by the Danish writer Soren Kierkegaard when he said: *Most people are subjective towards themselves and objective towards others; the task is to become objective to oneself and subjective towards others.* This is an existential way of saying *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God...and thy neighbour as thyself.*

The opposite is hell. The hell described by Shakespeare in *Richard III: Richard loves Richard: that is I am I.*

We are weak and fallible people but, by the grace of God within us, we are able to struggle, however feebly, towards the light. And we do this by entering the subjectivity of our neighbour. Just now and again, by that grace of God operating within us, we are able to reach out in this way. When we do so, far from losing ourselves, we find that God hands us back our soul just a little bit more in the condition he would like us to be: the condition called *blessedness*. Well, what I should say is that really – as you know – I have been talking about love.

May our love, then, which is the same love as God's love, for there is only one love, indivisible, enter into those of our friends who are sick or in any ways distressed and restore them, uplift them, cheer and strengthen them, In and through Our Lord Jesus Christ. And may the souls of the departed rest in peace