

Address at the Sung Eucharist for the Feast of St Luke ('the beloved physician'), by Professor Peter Sullivan, Director of Medical Education for the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust and Reader in Paediatric Gastroenterology. Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford, Sunday 18 October 2015.

Today is St Luke's day. Luke was the only Apostle who was not a Jew. He was Greek. Like Paul, he never saw Christ. All that is written in his eloquent Gospel he acquired from hearsay, from witnesses, from Mary, from disciples, and from the Apostles. His first visit to Israel took place almost a year after the Crucifixion. He is author of the third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles and was a companion of the Apostle Paul right up to the end, as we hear in today's reading from Timothy.

You may or not believe in patron saints but he is the patron saint of bachelors, bookbinders, brewers, glassmakers, goldsmiths, lace makers, painters, sculptors, and if you are a student - well then - Luke is your patron saint too.

I hope that the fact that he is also patron saint of butchers is not the reason that he is most famously known as the patron saint of surgeons and physicians.

Saint Paul refers to Luke as "*the beloved physician*" and it is only in Luke's gospel that we hear the parables of the Good Samaritan, and the ten lepers. The theme of healing runs throughout Luke's gospel.

So, when Michael invited me to speak today it seemed that the theme of "health" would be appropriate.

It may surprise you to know that the majority of senior medical students in this university struggle to provide a satisfactory definition of the word "health". A few will remember the definition provided in the Constitution of the World Health Organisation (1946) which states that "*good health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*". This fails, of course, to define what is meant by "*well-being*".

In fact - the word health shares its etymological origin with two other words which give a clue to its real meaning . These words are "whole" and, surprisingly, "holy".

To be healthy is to be whole.

Whole not just in body - but also in mind and spirit.

So, if you think that you are truly healthy then what I have to say may not interest you. As Luke says in chapter 15: "*They that are whole need not a physician: but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.*" (Luke 15: 31,32).

This word 'Repentance' or 'Metanoia' in Greek is probably the worst mistranslation in the Bible and has been called "*a linguistic and theological tragedy*".

The word actually signifies a change of Mind: a change in the orientation and action of the whole inner nature, intellectual, affectional and moral.

It means going beyond one's ordinary mind; one's ordinary forms of thought, and one's conditioning from infancy.

The fact is that there exists a higher and deeper level within us than that which is familiar, habitual and mechanical.

Metanoia thus opens us up to the possibility of transformation.

This idea of transformation is evident in Luke's gospel: for example in Luke 5, 36-37 we hear:

"No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. If he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined"

We are invited to be open to the possibility of a higher level within ourselves and this is a central part of Christ's teaching: his first miracle was to transform water held in stone jars into wine. This transition stone – water – wine is symbolic of the necessary transformation in Man. But we cannot make this transition with all the solidified prejudices, attitudes, opinions and attachments that life has formed in us.

We cannot receive the new wine of Christ's teaching in old bottles.

Nor can this teaching be merely added on to the old. It cannot be sown on to the old. Christ and all he represents is the new: The Good News.

The Good News is that the kingdom of God is within you. In today's gospel Luke 10 we hear: *"The kingdom of God is come near to you"* (Luke 10:9) but in Luke 17, 21 he is more explicit: *".....for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you."*

This is an astonishing statement.

Right here and now - the Kingdom of God is within you. What can that mean?

As the Kingdom of God is indescribable, beyond space-time, dimensionless, eternal, infinite and imperishable, then how can the mind grasp this?

Well the truth is that it cannot. Reason can take us so far but largely by demonstrating to us what it is not.

But we need faith also. Belief that what is said in scripture is true and that it provides the pointers and directions necessary for us to discover the truth about ourselves - about our real nature - about our origin – about the underlying Unity in the creation and how we as individuals relate to that whole....to the Kingdom of God.

Transformation may occur through grace and - in this view - the "repentance" Luke calls for is not so much a prerequisite as it is a consequence of the experience of the dawning Kingdom of Heaven.

Repentance is less a backward moving and paralysing regret for past sinfulness and more a progressive embrace of a new order which makes one's old life inauthentic and misdirected by comparison.

So we cannot evolve towards wholeness - true health - unless we change, unless we surrender our conditioned mind with all its desires, wants, ambitions etc.

As Christ says in Luke 9:24-25: *“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?”*

We cannot find our “*very self*” unless we move from darkness to light - unless our inner life becomes more important than our outer life.

In the East there is a certain type of monkey trap which is simply a nut in a tethered bottle the neck of which is so narrow that it can admit the hand of the monkey if it is open. The monkey grabs the nut but it cannot remove its clenched fist from the bottle and – as it refuses to let go of the nut – it is trapped. We can be like that; we do want to have our cake and eat it. Not only are we reluctant to let go of what we have, we use our energies to acquire more – whether fame, fortune or whatever drives us. As it says in the Book of Common Prayer *“We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us.”*

The health of the physical body is intimately related to the health of our mind. I am presenting a personal view here and my thesis is that a mind directed towards the Divine is - more whole – more healthy – than one totally immersed in the material world.

A physician cannot make you healthy; all they can do is to help remove some of the obstacles to physical health. Our modern medicine is immensely clever at removing obstacles to health in the physical body and people now live much longer lives, which is a good thing.

Modern medicine, however, is not able to produce a healthy mind – the current vogue for “mindfulness” now being embraced by medicine may be a step in this direction; a quiet, still and observant mind is assuredly a prerequisite to good health - to wholeness.

A healthy mind always has been and will remain a personal responsibility.

For me, the admonition also in Luke *“Physician heal thyself”* is a poignant reminder of this responsibility. I know that I am one of those that Luke calls to repentance – to metanoia – to change of mind and heart. I know that I more often than not “miss the mark” - I find ‘missing the mark’ the most helpful concept of “sin”.

We have choice in every thought, word and deed and ought to be very careful what we choose. As far as the body is concerned, we can choose what and how much to eat and drink, and whether or not to exercise the body. We can choose what influences we expose the mind to - from the company we keep, to the literature we read, the music we listen to and so on.

We already know what is good for us but too often we choose unwisely. This is ignorance and it has been said that ignorance is the final disease.

“final in the sense that the greatest disease is undoubtedly ignorance. As long as men are ignorant, they will be surrounded by different types of disease - physical, mental, emotional of every sort“.

Finally, it would be conducive to our health if we could remember - to paraphrase our alumnus C.S. Lewis :*“You are not a body with a soul - you are a soul - with a body”.*

And so through a little disciplined discrimination but largely through Grace – Grace of the Scriptures and Grace and infinite love of Our Lord Jesus Christ – we can transform and be made whole to become healthy in body, mind and Spirit.