St Luke’s Day 18 October 2020

I caught the tail end of an interview on the radio last week
with Auckland Council’s chief economist
who was talking about predicting the future.

He said,

"Never in my economics career did I think I'd be using
public health advice as a starting point
for trying to think of where the economy is heading…

This is not something they teach you in any textbook."[[1]](#footnote-1)

Well ain’t that the truth.

The same could be said for all of us in 2020.

So much of our focus has been on the global disaster wrought by Coronavirus, and the hunt to create a vaccine.

We are desperate for the thing that will fix this menace.

The thing that will allow us to return to life-as-normal.

We want a cure.
And we’d quite like it now, please and thank you.

But in the midst of the enormity of 2020 (and in fact every year)
we, and people all over the world
have had our own life-altering events for which there is no textbook.

Many of you will know that for the past two years,
Bishop Jim has been a regular name
on our prayers of intercession.
I’m sure that’s true for parishes all over this diocese.
Jim died at the end of September, in the midst of
stem cell transplant – a high risk treatment
which was his only hope of cure from a
particularly aggressive type of lymphoma.

One of the big questions that every person of faith
must reckon with
is what happens when people we love get sick.
We pray for them, because that is what people of faith do.

It is our privilege and responsibility, our duty and our joy.
And sometimes they get better and sometimes they don’t.

So what is it we think we are doing
when we pray for those who are sick?

Anna Haugen makes a helpful distinction
between healing and cure. She asserts that

*“our medical system—[in fact] our whole society!—
focuses on curing … instead of healing.
We want something simple, easy, quick,
something that restores [a person to normality] right away.”* [[2]](#footnote-2)

And how fortunate we are to live in a time
when so many conditions can be cured.
Modern medicine is an amazing thing.

We have machines that can show us pictures of our insides
to enable accurate diagnosis,
we have blood tests that evaluate how our organs are working.

We have surgeries and chemotherapy and medications
and physio and acupuncture,
and so many amazing interventions which can result in cure.

*“Healing, though”,* writes Anna Haugen, *“is different.
Healing is about renewing the body and soul.
Healing is about being raised up.
It’s about reconnecting with the community.
It’s about becoming most deeply yourself,
the person God intended you to be.
Healing is about our whole lives as God’s children.
Curing wounds and fevers can be a part of it,
but*only*a part.
In my time as a pastor,* [writes Haugen] *I have seen healing occur
in deathbeds and funeral homes.
I have seen people cured of disease
and yet still lost and isolated and broken.
Curing is not the same as healing.”*

The Gospels of Jesus include numerous healing stories.
Mostly, people came to him seeking a cure.
A short-term fix.
But curing people was only part of what Jesus had in mind.
He wanted more.

“The healing ministry of Jesus … shows Jesus' commitment
to **restore the whole person to God**
and not focus on a single dimension of healing.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Take Blind Bartimaeus. Blind from birth, a beggar.

His blindness is cured, but not only that.
He is “restored to fellowship and to
participation in the ministry of Jesus.
[He follows Jesus on the way and] becomes
part of the Good News, part of the Gospel,
part of the community of God’s people. That’s healing.”

Jesus sought not only to heal the person,
but the person-in-community.

And that remains true today.

*“Jesus calls* us *to be*whole*. He wants* us *to be renewed.
He wants* us *to be most deeply ourselves and
to be connected with God and with each other.”*

But in case this sounds like a lesser thing, know this:

*“healing is hard work.
It means being open to change. It means being open to God.
It means, first and foremost, acknowledging
that things in your life and community and self are wrong, broken, and that you can’t fix them on your own.*

*It means acknowledging that you need God
and you need other people. …
Sometimes, healing means learning to
live with what can’t be cured.
Sometimes, healing means accepting that things*can’t*be fixed, and accepting that you are a beloved child of God even still.”*

But it is so very tempting to get focused on fixes and cures.
And so, when we come across things that can’t be cured—
like death, and grief, and long-term illness, and depression,
and addiction, and abuse—we either turn away from it
or we try and fix it.

We try and fix it by giving *“helpful advice,
rather than sitting with others and being with them
praying with them, honouring their struggles,
rejoicing in their successes and mourning their failings,
to help them build community,
to help them know that they are beloved children of God
even in suffering and isolation.*

*We are called, in other words,
to help to heal others even as they suffer things
that cannot be cured.”*

I was privileged to be one of the people
who accompanied Bishop Jim through his illness.

I and many others prayed for him daily
because it was our privilege and our responsibility,
our duty and our joy to do so.

Was Jim cured? No.

Do I wish it were different? Oh yes.

Did he experience healing over the course of his illness?
I am certain of it.

But here’s an equally important question.

Did I and the others journeying with Jim
in sickness and in health experience healing?
Without doubt.

It was a beautiful, painful, life-giving, loving process.

It was a process of restoring part of us to God and to each other.

For, as Anna Haugen writes

*“there can be healing
even in the midst of pain, and grief, and illness.
There can be love and renewal even in the midst of brokenness. There can be hope in the midst of loss.
There can be community even when the world tries to isolate us. And when we reach out—when we comfort people who are sick, and bring food to those who grieve,
and are willing to be honest and compassionate
with ourselves and others,
and*be there*for people
even when there’s no quick fix or easy answer—
when we do that, we are part of God’s healing.
We are God’s hands in the world.”*

If COVID has shown us anything
it is despite everything we might have thought a year ago
there are still some things for which there is
no quick fix or easy answer.

And there is a very real risk that when we do eventually
achieve a vaccine, we might discover tat the world is cured
but has not taken the opportunity to be healed.

So I wonder whether – as we anxiously wait for a cure –
we could shift our focus to healing?

To take up the opportunities to be with others,
to reach out with compassion and honesty.
To look within ourselves and our communities
to see what is broken.
To notice the hard work of healing to which we might be called.

For while there is no textbook,
there is faith and hope and love.

And by the grace of God, may there be healing.

Amen.

1. David Norman, quoted in an interview of RNZ https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/business/428255/aucklanders-lost-200-jobs-a-day-during-august-lockdown [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *All text in italics:* Anna Haugen, https://wordsoffaith.wordpress.com/2015/02/09/the-difference-between-healing-and-curing/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alvin Lloyd Maragh, *The Healing Ministry of Jesus as Recorded in the Synoptic Gospels,* Abstract of Thesis, viii. https://scholarsrepository.llu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1450&context=etd [↑](#footnote-ref-3)