

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 30 SEPTEMBER 2012**

Psalm 124

James 5: 13 – 20

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“Done some anointing lately?”



After five chapters full of good advice and exhortation about the life of the community of Christ and the desired behaviour of individual Christians, James has come to the final verses of his letter. He finishes with an exhortation to pray, something not uncommon to other New Testament epistle writers. Again the focus is on the community and the behaviour of individuals within that community.

Are any of you suffering? Pray, says James. The suffering referred to here is not just any kind of general suffering, but most probably the suffering of persecution. The letter of James was most probably written in the middle of the Jerusalem persecutions around 45 CE. With this James indicates that these are not to be responded to with impassive acceptance of the inevitable, but with prayer. Actively bringing before God the distress people find themselves in. Actively sharing it with Him to find support and inspiration to persevere in times of trouble.

Are any of you cheerful? They should praise. As in the bad times, God's nearness should be sought in the good times as well. Because sharing joy will double it, as shared grief will alleviate the pain.

That is the first advice. Prayer is for sharing your life with God. Be it good or bad. Whether you're on top of the world or feeling very low, to seek God's closeness in every state of mind....

Next James again recommends prayer, but it is not quite in the same way as before: Are any of you sick? They should call for the elders..... Not first of all to God, but to the community!

Sickness, a condition that, in contrast to hardship as a consequence of persecution is regarded as something that can be elevated by and within the community of Christ.

This connects back to something that was said in chapter 2 and there is a catch as well. In Chapter 2 James has written about elders who think they are too good to mix with the ordinary people in the congregation. Elders that keep themselves aloof from those who they imagine are in lower segments of congregational life. Using the congregational network for their own advancement in society only.

It is those same elders that are now to be summoned when somebody is ill, pray over them and anoint them with oil. In other words: do some hands on work with the sick of the congregation.

This would not have gone down well with these elders. Sick people were treated with suspicion in those days. Illness was connected to sinfulness in most people's minds at that time, and it was not unusual for people to think that those who fell ill must have committed some dreadful sin and were therefore best avoided. And apart from that, people tended to

be afraid of the sick, afraid to catch whatever the other person had come down with. In a world where little was known about the mechanics of illness, the bedside of a sick person was not regarded as an attractive place to find oneself. So people tended to stay away from illness and sick people as much as they could.

This connection of sickness and sin is not as strange as it may seem. In our world today people are still blamed for their illness. We will connect it to lifestyle for instance, or environment, or psychology, and in that way ward off the disconcerting feeling that something may befall us as easily as other people. And you only need to talk to anybody who has suffered serious illness to discover ostracising people who are suffering from disease or calamity is still happening today.

People will start to avoid you once bad news or a bad diagnosis gets out. Because they do not know what to do or say. But not only that, also because they don't like to be close to a person that is ill or suffering. The instinctual, irrational fear that somehow sickness and death might transfer itself is still very much alive, as well as the illusion that we can protect ourselves and ours if we only live properly and healthily, or that we can fend off suffering by ignoring it.

So, even though we, with modern medicine have learned to look at illness in a completely different way to the people that lived in the time of James, and even though we understand a lot more about how illness really works, even in our society people will often become ostracised after they've fallen ill.

In James' view that should not happen in a Christian Community. A stance that was in no way the norm in the society he was part of. Those who are ill should receive extra attention he says, and be surrounded by prayer and care. And those who are leaders in the community should be the first to show their faces and be of help.

Again: Those elders who have been so severely told off in Chapter 2 for keeping their distance to the "lowly" in the congregation did probably not like this message at all. This particular exhortation is again not only a summons to individual people to look after one another, but also an encouragement for the Christian community to hold together. To bring together rich and poor, high and low, ill and healthy because they are all in equal measure part of the body of Christ. The rich, high and healthy summoned to look after the poor, low and sick. With their hands very literally on administering oil, holding those who are ill and in pain.

That is more difficult than it may sound to you who are, after all, part of a fairly homogenous congregation where everybody is fairly well washed and cleanly dressed. For James' elders it probably meant they had to touch people they would normally not have gone near to, pray for people they would normally not even have talked to because the social distance between them was just too large.

I still very vividly remember the time, in my first field placement, when I was asked to lay hands on a woman who lived well out of the boundaries of polite society, her house a smelly mess of unwashed laundry and dishes, her body covered in scabs and sores. And how difficult it was not to recoil. It is that kind of distance we are talking about here. But even when it concerns somebody we know and care about it may still be difficult to pray with them, lay hands on them, anoint them even, because we are so used to keeping our distance and not coming near.

Prayer, touching one another is intimate, an intimacy that is open to abuse and that some people only for that reason withdraw from. James tells us though that it is important, important because it brings healing. Important because through our closeness we can bring some of God's closeness near to each other.

The confessing of sins to James is very closely attached to that. James, by speaking about illness and sin in one breath indicates that they have everything to do with each other. Sin is illness, in the sense that it is something that prevents us from being whole and healthy. Guilt something that can deeply disturb and spoil our lives, to the point of being sick with it. It is another thing we should not shrink away from in each other when we face God.

As for illness there is healing available in sharing the load and bringing it before the Lord. A raising up of body and spirit. Healing not only a physical healing, but even more importantly a healing of the soul. The word used for healing here even suggests a meaning where the healing of the soul is more important and goes before the healing of the body.

By bringing up the story of Elijah, James uses a rhetorical hyperbole to tell his readers not to underestimate the power of prayer. Don't underestimate prayer, scripture tells us it can work miracles!

For James prayer is a very powerful instrument given to the community of Christ to healing, bringing together, supporting and sharing. An instrument that will help purify the community from sin and division, alleviate the pain of suffering and feelings of guilt. It will pull down boundaries and involve and include when it is practised by all for all. Last but not least it will heal, sometimes with a miraculous and mind boggling strength, sometimes more slowly and unobtrusively.

Practising prayer is calling God close to us in whatever befalls us in life, bringing before him suffering and joy, illness and health, sin and forgiveness. Some of it directly, some of it by the community.

Sharing helps, be it with God or with one another. Prayer helps, be it the support of the almighty or the closeness of another human being interested and involved in what befalls us. And faith works most powerfully when both of these are brought together. Amen.