

**Sermon Preached at St Edward's Cambridge**  
**18<sup>th</sup> September 2005**  
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I want to preach this morning about how Christians cope with illness, and how illness affects Christian faith and spirituality. Many of you have a good deal more experience illness than I have of. However, as most of you will know, I have recently joined the lists of those affected by illness, and will be having surgery for cancer of the colon in just over a week's time. I am preaching about this today because illness is an important issue for many of us, and right now I have the opportunity to preach about it with the immediacy that comes from personal experience. I am no longer vulnerable to the riposte 'what does he know about that?'

Illness gives you a sharp reminder of the frailties and imperfections of the body. Now we tend to live longer, most of us have the experience of our bodies starting to go wrong well before physical death. Humans are often tempted by the fantasy of having bodies with no imperfections, or bodies that will go on for ever. Much of science fiction is built around such fantasies. However, if we had bodies like that, we wouldn't really be human. Remember that Jesus was incarnate in the kind of fallible human body that each one of us inhabits. We humans are always tempted by an inflated view of ourselves, but our fallible bodies help to keep us humble and keep us human. Taking everything into account, we have reason to be grateful for the weakness of our bodies.

If we are to glory in anything there is good reason, as St Paul said, for glorying in our infirmities (2 Corinthians 11.30). As we heard in the New Testament lesson, St Paul suffered from what he calls, rather mysteriously, a 'thorn in the flesh'. Three times, he says, he had prayed to be delivered from it, but he was not. Rather, God told Paul that his strength would be made perfect in his weakness. Through being weak, he became strong. The weakness of the body can actually contribute to spiritual strength.

However, chronic pain does sap the spirit. It is very difficult to pray or meditate when you are tired, ill, or in pain. I expect to get a sharp reminder of that in the immediate aftermath of surgery when, for a time, I will find I simply don't have the relatively healthy body that I am used to. Fortunately, I can expect to get over that within a month or two. Some of you have to live month after month, year after year, without a sense of physical well-being; and that really does sap the spirit. However, there are ways of adjusting even to that, ways of praying, forms of spiritual practice that are possible even in the most difficult circumstances, and they can be powerful. What that teaches us is that spiritual commitment is all-important, and that there is always some way or other in which the spirit can rise above physical constraints and make good spiritual use of our circumstances.

One of the most memorable demonstrations I have seen of how spirit can triumph over the limitations of the body was when Edward Patey came to preach in this pulpit at a few years ago. He died in recent days at the age of 90 and so is currently much in the thoughts of those who knew him. He was for many years Dean of Liverpool and one of the great leaders of the post-war Church. Oh for more leaders like Edward now! When he preached here, he got into the pulpit with obvious difficulty, battling against physical decrepitude. Once there, he displayed a remarkable mental and spiritual vigour, breadth of vision, and warmth of heart. The body was fading, and I think it was perhaps the last time he tried to get into a pulpit, but mind and spirit were completely undimmed.

We have become increasingly used to good health in the modern world, thanks to all the achievements of modern medicine. Many conditions can be treated now in a way that was simply impossible not so long ago. It is right to be thankful for that. At this moment in time I am profoundly grateful that surgery for cancer of the colon has become as effective as it has. Yet, with all these achievements of modern medicine, has come as certain intolerance of infirmity of any kind. We are not used to being ill, and we don't expect to be ill. When illness intrudes, it is tempting in a to be either annoyed or panicky. There is a great deal of panic about cancer in our society; it has become an almost unmentionable subject.

Paradoxically, our intolerance of illness simply tightens the grip that illness can have over us. The more accepting and patient we are, the less harm illness will do us. A calm frame of mind and a strong faith make for better health, and speedier recovery. That applies to physical illness, but it also applies to depression. It is when people get really upset about the fact that they are depressed that depression gets an even tighter grip on them, and really drags them down. Our intolerance of physical or mental problems simply exacerbates those problems. On the contrary, a strong faith helps us not to panic. To be calm and matter of fact about whatever mental or physical problems we suffer from helps to keep them in their place.

It is important to keep a sense of perspective about things. We may be ill, but that is no reason for our illness to take us over so completely that we see ourselves as invalids first and foremost. For us Christians, the most important fact about us is that we are followers of Christ. That is who we are. Our sense of identity is bound up with that more than with anything else. There is no need to deny illness or to try to pretend it doesn't exist, but there is no reason to regard it as the most important thing about us.

Equally, there is no reason to panic if it seems likely that illness will shorten our life span. I am fortunate in having a form of cancer that is relatively unlikely to shorten my life; other people are not so fortunate. Anne White was not so fortunate, and to see the life of someone like that cut short by cancer is deeply tragic. However, for Christians, even prolonging life span is not the most important issue. Only those who have no faith, who have no higher values or priorities, can regard prolonging life as the most important thing. As far as we are concerned, what matters most is living in Christ, being followers of him in easy times and hard times, staying close to him in life and in death sharing in the spiritual transformation that he brings.

For me, one of the most powerful verses in St Paul's letters is this: 'If we live, we live in the Lord, and if we die, we die in the Lord; so whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's' (Romans 14. 8). That puts very powerfully, very succinctly, the point that a commitment to Christ is more important than how long we live. And with that attitude, death need not terrify us; life-threatening illnesses need not terrify us. Life in Christ, which is what really matters, goes on regardless of the transformation of our mortal existence that comes about through physical death. Illness leads us to ponder our mortality, and can help us to clarify what is really important to us. It shows up whether or not prolonging our own lives is what is supremely important to us.

Job put it well in our Old Testament lesson this morning, 'The Lord gives and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (1.21). The Lord may give us many more years, or only a few days; he may give us good or poor health. Whichever it is, we live under his providence and find our fulfilment in giving him thanks and praise. This is not defeatism. Paradoxically, with that kind of attitude, we are more likely to triumph over whatever forms of illness or adversity come our way.