

parcel of any thoughtful faith. Painful as this may be, we pray to God as the person that we are, and not as the far holier person that we sometimes wish we were. There is a gentle role model for us in the prayer of the father with a sick child who says to Jesus, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief' (Mark 9.24). Our 'faith' can wane in the course of our lives, but it can also increase. We may not always sense that God is active, but as we persevere in prayer we will find that he is active, blessing us in often unexpected ways.

On those occasions when our prayer seems to receive no response and we cry out 'Why?' we lay our heartfelt laments, petitions and prayer in God's lap. And we learn that, while we long for a cure, healing and blessing may also come as we accept a challenging illness or an injury that will not resolve. As Christians, we come to understand that death is to be seen not as failure but as ultimate healing, for Christ has promised the gift of eternal life.

### Death

Death is a unique and essential moment of human experience. Yet while we are aware that death comes to us all, we have innumerable ways of denying its inevitability. Faced with a terminal illness we continue to pray for healing. Sometimes that happens; e.g. a cancer goes into remission. And we give thanks and praise to God.

At other times, though, the illness continues and death draws near; but we continue our prayers for healing, and rightly so. We pray for the patient, friends and family; we pray for a deep awareness of God's love; for those who struggle to accept the coming of death; for healing of fractured relationships. We give thanks for all loved ones, for all the care we have received. We claim the promise that all things work together for good for those who love the Lord. And we give thanks that God carries each one of us through death wrapped in his undying love; that we go through the 'door of death' to the fullness of life in Christ.

In death, as in life, we are never alone.



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## Healing

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JESUS CHRIST demonstrated a way to love and care for the sick that we seek to continue today. Jesus, when sending out the seventy disciples, told them to ‘cure the sick and say to them the Kingdom of God has come near to you’ (Luke 10: 9) and in Mark’s Gospel he says, ‘They will lay their hands on the sick and they will recover’ (Mark 16.18). As Christians we believe that it is God who heals and throughout our lives we work and pray for the wellbeing of all created life, brought into harmony with God.

Healing comes into a sharp focus for most of us during times of illness, trauma or disease. Our normal pattern of life is interrupted as we face our own illness or that of a loved one. As people of faith, we naturally turn to God for strength, support and healing. As human beings, any disruption in our wellbeing – physical, mental, spiritual, social - upsets us and urges us to seek healing.

Modern methods of prevention, diagnosis and treatment give us an expectation of a full and healthy life and, in the event of illness, of a return to full health and potential; but inevitably medical care sometimes fails us, in spite of the skill and dedication of doctors and nurses whose lives are devoted to healing the sick.

In praying for healing, we usually hope for a restoration to full physical and mental health. There is, however, a deeper element to divine healing, for which we give thanks even when physical healing does not occur: the loss of fear, a sense of stillness, peace, freedom from pain and distress, reconciliation of damaged relationships, acceptance in the face of loss of ability, and indeed readiness to face death. Return to wholeness may include adapting to a new way of living even with a permanent injury, ailment or psychological scar tissue.

### **What is the ministry of healing?**

The Church’s ministry of healing assures us first and foremost that we are all, each and every one, loved by God and that it is God’s will to heal and save us. We are all in need of God’s healing throughout our lives; it is not just for those suffering illness. We all need to seek wholeness through closer relationship with God. Theological understanding as well as medical practice, has evolved. Few would now share the view expressed in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer Exhortation: ‘Whatsoever your sickness is, know certainly that it is God’s visitation’. Few would now subscribe to the old belief that illness is somehow a punishment for sin or failure sent by God.

Yet people who are ill may still wonder if they are somehow responsible for their own illness, and such thoughts, along with the question, ‘Why did God let this happen to me?’, can create a sense of alienation from God. It is important to listen to such fears and questions when people are seeking prayer for healing,

because simply through expressing themselves and being heard with understanding and sympathy people already find release from suffering and the beginning of healing. Only after listening carefully should we respond that illness is never God’s punishment – (see the story of the man born blind in John 9) – even if it may occasionally be the result of poor life choices. In so doing, we mirror God’s compassionate and healing love.

### **Resources for healing prayer**

The Book of Common Prayer (2004) contains many resources for ministry to the sick. Many churches offer special services of healing with the laying on of hands, also intercessory prayer groups whose members undertake to pray daily for those in need. Pastoral and prayer support is available through healthcare / hospital chaplains, through parish clergy, and through the dedicated Church’s Ministry of Healing teams in Dublin and Belfast.

The Church follows Jesus’ example of healing through the work of lay people and clergy alike, as we are all called to pray for each other’s healing. A vital element, supported by accounts of healing in the Gospels, seems to be faith, no matter how small (Matthew 17:20 – ‘faith the size of a mustard seed’), whether on the part of those who are sick or of those who pray for them, or both. Thus an important element in prayer with a sufferer is helping them to open themselves entirely to all the healing God desires for them, thanking God for that healing love; and that is so often where miracles begin.

### **Faith**

In prayer, Christians anticipate a world renewed in accordance with God’s will; we commit ourselves in hope to the coming of God’s Reign or Kingdom. Jesus announced the Kingdom of God with parables as well as by healing the sick. His stories and actions pointed beyond themselves to the peace and flourishing that God alone gives, in contrast with the disorder – including illness and suffering – of our present experience.

For Christians, healing remains a powerful sign of God’s transformative will for our world. The devotion of medical professionals caring for those who suffer is akin to the prayers for healing that we offer for ourselves and for others. From the perspective of the gospel, whether one is a highly-skilled surgeon preparing to operate or an anxious parent praying for a sick child, our search for healing follows the example of Jesus, desiring that God’s Kingdom may come and God’s will may be done on earth as in Heaven.

Religious faith engages us in different ways. Doubt is part and