

ILLNESS, HEALING AND HUMAN DIGNITY

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Abstract:

The experience of illness and its physical, emotional and social consequences present us with a challenge when viewed as limitations that affect negatively one's dignity. Healing, on the other hand, can be perceived as restoration of one's wholeness and therefore restoration of one's dignity. The paper offers a biblical reflection on healing, showing that the divine vision for humanity is a disease-free existence, characterised by harmony and wellbeing. Thus, healing is an important aspect of God's restoration. However, the value of human beings is not determined by their health status, but by their relationship with the Creator. And so it should be with one's perception of human dignity.

Keywords: *Human dignity, Illness, Disease, Health and restoration, Healing, Isaiah 53.*

Introduction

Nowadays, the loss of dignity due to illness and suffering justifies, in the eyes of some, the longing for untimely death, and, in extreme cases, suicidal or homicidal action that leads to such ends. However, this is a shaky and hardly defensible position, a markedly selfish approach to life, grounded on a fallacious understanding of the nature of human existence and consequently on erroneous perceptions of human dignity. In fact, illness and its consequences are realities all humans have had to face since the dawn of time. Women and men, young and old, rich and poor – no one can really avoid illness. Sooner or later, throughout life, suffering caused by disease, accompanied by dependence on the help of others and the consequent feeling of loss of dignity, will become part of one's experience. In fact, if anything, the COVID-19 pandemic that, at the time of this writing, continues to wreak havoc at a global level, has proved more than ever before that there is no such thing as a disease-free life. Especially as we advance in

age, but not only, disease tends to set in, bringing with it a host of problems and a related deterioration process that diminishes one's quality of life and ultimately leads to physical death.

Considering these, it would seem that, primarily, illness affects us biologically, for physical changes, even physical disabilities, are its immediate consequences. But disease also affects us psychologically, since prolonged suffering can cause significant behavioural changes, that may even lead to shifts in personality. Furthermore, since even the simplest illness may result in needs that can only be addressed by the people surrounding us, disease affects us socially, as well. Sometimes it may bring strained relationships, as people in our life may have to accept limitations or take on additional responsibilities caused by our condition. Ultimately, illness disturbs us spiritually, as well. Many a time the sufferer's relationship with God is affected by the level of his or her quality of life, especially in cases where one interprets life events according to the principles of a retributive theology.

Much has been written that addresses each aspect of this experience, making any rehearsal here of such discussions both impossible (due to the amount of literature available) and unnecessary. The argument offered below will add to the discussion in a theological fashion by commenting on the issues at hand in light of biblical theology, particularly the Isaianic prophetic vision for a life in which illness is counteracted by God's redemptive work, through his Suffering Servant.

Human Condition and Human Destiny – The Biblical Perspective

According to the Bible, illness was never a part of God's initial design for creation. The creation account in the book of Genesis portrays God, the Creator, engaged in evaluating the results of his work and concludes that all God created "was very good" (Gen. 1:31 NRSV). The theological vision thus expressed is at the same time unique and positive. It is specific to how the Scripture speaks of God and his purposes. The revelation thus given is of a God who is perfect and benevolent, a Creator who not only creates, but also remains involved with his creation, to evaluate, sustain and bless it. Implicitly, we also understand that the humans such a God creates are destined for an existence full of peace, harmony, health and well-being.

Obviously, this is quite an idyllic image, one that does not fit the dire reality of the present human condition. We further learn from the Genesis

account that the perfect existence envisioned by God is disturbed by man's disobedience and the undesirable consequences it brings over the entire creation. The "fall" described in Genesis 3, improperly called so, for Adam and Eve in fact choose conscientiously to disobey God, clearly affects the harmonious universe God had created. The humans, who so far had lived in perfect harmony with their Creator, are now cast away from the garden and consequently from God's presence (Gen. 3:23). The flawless rapport that characterised the relationship between Adam and Eve is broken, for they can no longer stand "naked" (meaning in innocence) in each other's presence (Gen. 3:7). And the mutually beneficial relationship between humankind and Earth deteriorates, for man's care for the planet transforms into toil and it no longer brings the desired results, but rather the planet gives back thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:17-18). Moreover, the disobedience opens the flood gates, for it brings into the world consequences. It is at this point that sin, disease, and death become a constant reality in the world God had created – the relentless destiny of all humans, at all times and in all places.

Nevertheless, God's history with mankind does not end on this gloomy tone. There are numerous passages that can be called as evidence that the main theological thrust of the Scripture is a positive one. Time and again, our eyes are opened to the possibility of healing and complete restoration – bodily, psychological, relational and spiritual. In the Old Testament such restoration includes an image of wholeness that becomes available through faithful participation in the covenant God establishes with his people. It is the *shalom* one can experience, the blessed existence only God can give, full of meaning and fulfilment. In the New Testament, the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus is made available in the physical realm through healing miracles, exorcisms and the forgiveness of sin. Of course, in the here and now, these are but signs of hope, the assurances that God's ultimate restoration is in the works. The end of the story given in the book of Revelation reveals that a return to an idyllic perfect perfect existence, free of illness, sorrow and death, in the presence of the Creator is God's ultimate plan for humanity and the creation (Rev. 21:1-7).

Theology of Healing and Restoration in Isaiah 53

The prophecy of Isaiah makes evident the truth that God is concerned with human wholeness, bodily, spiritual and emotional. The image of the

suffering Servant in chapter 53 that takes upon himself the sin and disease of humanity gives away a *bona fide* “therapeutic” theological vision, within which God’s plan for the restoration of the individual and the community is revealed. Images of a healing divinity, taken from other Old Testament traditions, are applied directly to the Servant figure in this passage. For instance, within the larger context, the portrayal of God as a caring Father is particularly powerful. Only in Hosea, another prophet contemporary to Isaiah, God’s healing act is a part of his parental care for his people¹. This suggests the importance of a functioning relationship with the divine as the key to a successful healing process. In this regard, Ake Hultkrantz observes that the concern with health and the restoration of health is a religious transaction. Thus, if a person suffers from bad health, if he or she falls critically ill, that is all dependent on, and provided for, by his or her relations with the supernatural world. Even smaller afflictions, which sometimes are regarded independently of religious motivations because of their insignificance follow this pattern. Thus, it is the general rule that all disease, every illness and bodily affliction, has its origin in a disturbed spiritual realm, in an inefficient or unfunctional relationship with the supernatural². This then suggests that the Isaianic perspective, which binds the healing of the body to the restoration of the covenantal relationship with God is theologically and therapeutically sound. God’s role as healer is not and cannot be separated from his actions as covenant partner. Thus, Isaiah portrays him as the one who both punishes unfaithfulness to the covenant and heals because of the covenant (e.g. Isa. 19:22; 57:18-19).

This portrayal of God in Isaiah as the healer of Israel is part of a more elaborated dramatic depiction of God in the Old Testament³, where

1 Cf. Emmanuel O. Nwaoru, *Imagery in the Prophecy of Hosea* [Ägypten und Altes Testament, vol. 41], Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1999, p. 109.

2 Ake Hultkrantz, *Shamanic Healing and Ritual Drama. Health and Medicine in Native North American Religious Traditions* [Health/Medicine and the Faith Traditions], New York, Crossroad, 1992, p. 1.

3 As Christopher Wright observes, “Yahweh is without question a character, a *dramatis persona*, in the great drama of the Old Testament. Indeed, as the leading character, Yahweh is portrayed in more depth and complexity than any of the human cast, simply because he participates in far more story-lines throughout far more generations than Methuselah”. See Christopher Wright, “The Ethical Authority of the Biblical Social Vision”, in Michael Schluter / John Ashcroft (eds.), *Jubilee Manifesto. A Framework, Agenda and Strategy for Christian Social Reform*, Leicester, IVP, 2005, p. 73.

God's care for the wellbeing of his people is described in a series of metaphors that paint the picture of a faithful God. Thus, God is a rock (Isa 26:4; 44:1) and an eagle (Deut. 32:11). He is the Potter that moulds his people, the clay (Isa 64:8). He is the Father (Isa 63:16) and the Mother (Hosea 13:8) of his people. The idea is that Israel would learn who God is. Would understand that the God who had liberated their ancestors from Egypt will continue to heal and cure God's children. Would learn to trust that God would care again for them in all circumstances.

In the Isaianic context, where the Suffering Servant appears, the portrayal of God as Creator is the foundational claim that guides a theology of healing and restoration. As Westermann claims, "God the Creator is thus bringing about for his creatures the wholeness of life which is his will for them"⁴. This connects to the larger rhetoric of Deutero-Isaiah, which speaks about the incomparability and exclusivity of God in all areas of human life, including the assurance of wellbeing and wholeness⁵. Thus, in God, Israel found a "source of community life that was dynamic and transcendent, that is, ever creatively and redemptively involved in the world"⁶. It is out of such an understanding of who God is, and in response to it, that Israel's notion of community life and wellbeing was formed. Israel's response was to a God that was active in the drama of history, a God who offered himself in relationship, and who would therefore be dynamically involved in their communal life in ways that were not available in the more static theological systems of the neighbouring kingdoms.

Against this general background, the themes of healing and restoration in Isaiah 53 are connected to the ideas of cultic cleansing and intercessory prayer, signifying reunion with the community and thus "communal salvation" and restoration of individual health. Rhetorically the chapter is a "cultic dramatization" revolving around the figure of the Servant, in which one can trace the transition, from the shedding of animal blood to that

4 Claus Westermann, "Salvation and Healing in the Community. The Old Testament Understanding," in *International Review of Mission*, 61-1/1972, p. 18.

5 See Hywel Clifford, "Deutero-Isaiah and Monotheism," in John Day (ed.), *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel. Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* [Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, vol. 531], London, T & T Clark, 2010, pp. 267-289.

6 Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called. The Growth of Community in the Bible*, Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 1986, p. 70.

of human blood and from animal substitution to personal sacrifice. The Servant is “bruised” for human transgressions (Isa 52:14) and his stripes become the healing of humankind (Isa 53:5). He bears the iniquity of sinners (Isa 53:6), just as sacrificial animals had done in Israel’s cult. He endures the divinely given bruises (Isa 53:10), thereby making intercession for many (Isa 53:12). And the end of all these is bold – the righteous Servant will “justify many” (Isa 53:11). Images and symbols that were traditionally reserved for God are transferred to the suffering Servant. It is through these images that the Servant is placed into the domain of God, becomes transparent for God, and becomes an image or likeness of God. Thus, in Isaiah 53 it is the very suffering of the Servant of God that effects healing on God’s people.

Reichenbach also brings clarity in this sense, showing that the healing in Isaiah 53 is realized dramatically, whereas the self-sacrifice of the Servant has the finality, it is curative and restorative⁷. It is curative since it resolves the fundamental human predicament of sin and it is restorative because it brings us back to a state of bodily wholeness through healing, covenantal wholeness through forgiveness and social wholeness through re-inclusion into God’s community, from which sin had ostracized us. Thus, as healer, God not only addresses the symptoms, but also the root causes of the human predicament. God both initiates and implements the healing. Seen in this light, the work of the Servant is not like that of the priests, who merely certify uncleanness and cleanness. The Servant actually takes upon himself the sins of the afflicted, who otherwise cannot find a cure. The Servant appropriates our infirmities and sins, and through his own subsequent suffering effects a cure for our predicament. That is why he is a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering, stricken, smitten and afflicted, pierced and crushed, wounded and killed. Our atonement comes through his suffering and death. In this way, the suffering Servant is also the Great Physician.⁸ In this regard, Paul Hanson’s concluding words are telling:

What is being described is not a scapegoat loaded with the iniquity of the people and then slaughtered capriciously as a substitute.

7 Bruce R. Reichenbach, “By His Stripes We Are Healed”, in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 41/1998, p. 557.

8 Reichenbach, *By His Stripes we are Healed*, p. 555.

Rather we encounter one who, having identified his human will with divine redemptive purpose, enters into solidarity with a people at their nadir point, in their guilt-ridden disease, and acts in partnership with God to break the bondage that is destroying them. The result is that they are shocked to their senses, accept the divine gift of healing, and thus are restored to the righteousness that enables them to carry in their vocation as God's people⁹.

Conclusions and Implications

The themes of healing and restoration examined above are important elements of the biblical teaching on human existence, human value and human destiny. We have seen above that the divine vision for humanity is characterised by harmony and wellbeing. Particularly, it is for a disease-free existence. As such, the Bible has much to say about the restoration of physical health, alongside the restoration of one's spiritual wholeness. On the one hand, such restoration is part of the eschatological hope of an existence free of suffering and tears. On the other hand, alongside the teaching about such ultimate restoration, the Bible also gives numerous examples of healing events and assurances for healing in the here and now. The Isaianic text discussed above is but one example of such teaching.

The implication of all these is that restoration and wellbeing is God's will for each one of us, in the eschaton, ultimately, but even during our earthly lives. This teaching ought to inform the theology and practice of the church in dealing with illness and suffering. In this regard, a few implications for a biblically grounded approach to illness and practices of healing would include the following truths:

- ♦ Physical healing, as all other forms of human restoration, comes from God. Whether through direct miraculous intervention or through the legitimate use of doctors, drugs and other means at our disposal, the only restorer of wellbeing is the Creator. Thus, although we should make full use of the help modern medicine has to offer, our trust is in the Lord (Ps 91).

9 Paul D. Hanson, "The World of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 40-55" in W.H. Bellinger / W.R. Farmer (eds.), *Jesus and the Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 1998, p. 18.

- ✦ Healing is a function of the community of believers, the Body of Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 14:1). Also, healing is intrinsic to God's work of salvation. As such, prayer for healing ought to be a common occurrence in the life of the Church.
- ✦ All prayers for healing are ultimately answered by God, but not all are answered in the here and now. Nor are they always answered in the way the one who prays imagines. God may choose to use one's experience of illness for a good purpose (2 Cor 12:9). Nevertheless, whether in this life or in the eschaton, ultimately God will eradicate all illness and suffering from our lives. (Rev 21:4).
- ✦ Forgiveness of sin and healing are intricately connected. The Isaianic text examined above teaches as much. Also, the New Testament teaches that in Jesus' healing practice the restoration of one's body was accompanied by the absolution of his or her sins (Lk 13, Jn 9). Therefore, one's prayer for healing ought to include confession of sin and repentance.
- ✦ True healing involves more than the simple restoration of one's body. It is the experience of wholeness and wellbeing that covers one's entire existence. It includes the restoration of harmony in all aspects of one's life. Ultimately, it includes the restoration of one's relationship with God.
- ✦ Finally, regarding human dignity and the reality of illness, the teaching of the Bible summarised above has far-reaching consequences. The glorious a vision of God's will for humanity, carries the implication that every human person, regardless of his or her health status, has equal value in God's eyes and therefore ought to be accorded the same measure of dignity and respect. This is a truth that ought to impinge on how we think and act in the world, for having dignity and granting dignity are both visible in our actions, in the harmonious ways we relate to each other, regardless of the gaps illness and disease may create between us and our neighbours.

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