

4 February 2024

Isaiah 40:21-31  
1 Corinthians 9:16-23  
Mark 1:29-39

Tsar Nicholas the Second of Russia was assassinated in 1918, along with his entire family. However, for much of the twentieth century there were rumours and claims that his fourth daughter, the 17-year-old Grand Duchess Anastasia, had somehow survived – her body was not found among the corpses.

Over the years, various women have claimed to be Anastasia, but have all eventually been found to be impostors. The most famous of these impostors, Anna Anderson, first appeared just two or three years after the murders. It was not until the mid-1990s, after Anna had died, that DNA testing proved conclusively that she could not have been Anastasia.

A book published in 1958 presented an account of Anastasia's escape from death in Anderson's own words. It has since been found to have been a well-executed hoax. The book was entitled "I am Anastasia".

In today's Gospel passage we read of the first of many reported healings by Jesus, that of Simon's mother-in-law, and then of many others from the town of Capernaum. And for many people today, these kinds of miraculous events are about as problematic as claims that Anastasia lived on beyond the 1918 assassination.

But I want to assert the reality of healing by the witness of my personal testimony. I'll briefly mention three cases.

Christine and I struggled with fertility issues in our early years of marriage. We sought prayer from our vicar, and, as an initial result of his prayer and counsel, got to a point of acceptance of the idea that our parenting might be by means of fostering or adoption: in fact we started on providing respite care through the Open Home Foundation. Then one day in late January 1990 during my prayer time, I found myself having a strong sense that God was doing something new for us in relation to this issue, and I felt emboldened to write in my journal "Gave thanks for new life within" – a coded reference, just in case Christine should happen across it, and just in case I was wrong. In October that same year our daughter was born. And it was

only after that that we found that a parishioner had in 1989 received a strong vision of Christine holding a babe in arms, but had not shared it with us out of concern that it might bring us pain.

Every now and then until she died a woman named Anne would tell me exactly how many years and months it had been since she had stopped hearing voices – the result, she told me, of my praying for her. I recall little of that occasion, except that she had come in great distress at the persistent accusing voices she had in her head, and that I had prayed simply, affirming the power and victory of Jesus in her life. It wasn't spectacular; it wasn't some fancy formula or approach I'd been taught. But the result was that within just a few days she was able to joyfully report that the voices had gone. And they never returned.

I have seen the transformative effect of the power of Jesus in the life of a young woman I know, who for three years was crippled by an unknown and debilitating disease which brought her to having to rely on a walker. Today she stands tall and free, completely healed.

So I assert the power of prayer, the power of Jesus, to heal.

But there remains a problem for many because it begs the question of why not all are healed.

There are various ways of answering that question – to do with unbelief or false belief; to do with the presence of unforgiven sin or guilt; to do with spiritual blockages arising from idolatry or engagement in demonic practices; to do with the fact that sometimes the presenting issue is not the main issue or is not the problem that most needs to be addressed right now; to do with the possibility that something might be usefully learnt through the experience of suffering ... and so on.

These various points could all be usefully explicated in a sermon each.

But today I want to focus on the one answer that overarches all of these things; and this answer is tucked away below the surface of our Gospel passage today.

The name Anastasia was given to the fourth Grand Duchess because, in honour of her birth, her father pardoned students who had been imprisoned for rioting. Anastasia means “breaker of chains” or “prison opener”. It also means “resurrection”, as it comes from the Greek word for resurrection, “anastasis”.

Simon’s fever-stricken mother-in-law is not named, but I am inclined to bestow on her the name “Anastasia”. For when Jesus went in to her we read that he “helped her up”: in the literal Greek he “lifted her up” or “raised her”. The Greek word for “lifted up” or “raised” is the same word that Mark uses in relation to what happens to Jesus at Easter: in Mark 16:6 the white-robed young man at the tomb tells the startled women, “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has been raised!”<sup>1</sup>

Why is this relevant? It is relevant because the healing, the “raising”, of Simon’s mother-in-law is a *signpost* of the greater reality to come: the resurrection of Jesus. All of the healings Jesus did were signposts like this. Certainly they were also acts of a compassionate God towards his people in need; but healings were not what Jesus’ ministry was fundamentally about.

We read on and find that after Jesus has healed a great many people in Capernaum, he goes off to a solitary place to pray. Simon and others go looking for him, and tell him, “Everyone is looking for you!” After the successful ministry of the first day, it is clear that there is still a significant unmet demand.

A miracle worker could have remained in Capernaum and ensured that all from there had their felt needs met. Someone might have been motivated to remain by compassion for those immediately present. Someone might have been motivated to continue through enjoyment of success and fame. Someone might have been motivated to carry on by the desire not to disappoint.

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<sup>1</sup> There is debate about whether the passive (“has been raised”) or the active (“is risen”) is intended – see discussion in Strauss, Mark, p. 719 – but the Greek is the same. I have used the passive simply because it shows more clearly the parallel.

Jesus *could* have remained in Capernaum, but he did not: “Let us go somewhere else”, he says, “so I can preach there also. That is why I came.” His goal is not the healings in themselves; his goal at this point is the proclamation of the coming reign of God. Following that the key task becomes inauguration of that reign of God through his dying and rising again. The healings support the proclamation, confirming the presence and power of the kingdom of God embodied in Jesus, underscoring the validity and authority of his words; and the healings are signposts of the resurrection to come.

But that still leaves unanswered a further question for us in our time, because for us Jesus’ resurrection has already taken place: why is it that not all who come to God are healed?

Well, we need to remember that the fullness of the life of the age to come, eternal life, awaits the second coming of Christ and new creation. Paul, using the metaphor of the “firstfruits”, the guarantee of the full harvest to come, writes about it in this way:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ... For as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.<sup>2</sup>

So ahead of the age to come, we all have to die of something. Even if Anastasia had miraculously survived assassination in 1918, she would be unlikely to be alive now at 122. Even those raised from the dead by Jesus surely went on to die, somehow, regardless of how much prayer to the contrary might have been offered. Such is the human condition in the present age. In the present age, healing is temporary; but a right relationship with God is eternal and will ensure life and wholeness – of body, mind, and spirit – in the age to come.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:20, 22-23

<sup>3</sup> Strauss, *Mark*, p.108

The good news is not the proclamation of a form of therapy, immediate relief for human suffering; the focus is not on what people received from Jesus. Rather the good news is the proclamation of Jesus, Israel's Messiah, the one with ultimate authority, the world's true king.

But it is true too that the *result* of that kingly reign will eventually be the restoration of all of creation into what it was meant to be all along, exhibiting God's perfect goodness and love. And we see foretastes of that restoration occurring when people now are freed from the bondage of evil spirits, as in last week's gospel reading, just as we see foretastes of that restoration when people are healed as in this week's reading. It is part of the in-breaking of God's kingdom.

Yes, Jesus met the felt needs of many. But there is much more to Jesus than that. Jesus is the good news that God's reign on earth has begun. Jesus is the world's true king, over against all rival powers.

We are called to wait upon the Lord – to look expectantly for his coming in power, through which we are saved and reconciled and restored.

We are called too to wait upon the Lord – to serve him whole-heartedly, using our gifts in the church and in the mundane ordinariness of our daily lives, in workplaces and in homes. We are called to serve him out of worship of who he is, and out of gratitude for all he has done and is doing for us.

We are called to serve him in praying for healing for others, and in proclamation that in him the reign of God has drawn near. And we can do this without needing to fear that we should be embarrassed about our prayer or our proclamation.

The imposter Anna Anderson made the claim "I am Anastasia". Jesus, who is no imposter, makes the claim in John 11, "I am the *anastasis* (the resurrection) and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."

It is this Jesus, the resurrection and the life, that we serve and proclaim.

## Sources

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