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## Precious Moments

Psalm 103 begins,

Praise the Lord, O my soul;

And let all that is within me praise his holy Name.

Praise the Lord, O my soul,

And forget not all his benefits;

Who forgiveth all thy sin,

and healeth all thine infirmities.

I often think of these comforting verses when I visit the sick and infirm. They speak of a transcendent good that we firmly catch hold of at different times and seasons of our lives.

I am often asked how I can visit the critically sick or counsel the confessing soul. It seems to some that these things are so hard and unpleasant that it must require great nerve and courage. Well I have really never found it so. I suppose it is God's gift for which I am profoundly grateful. But I am aware of something else as well.

I believe these truths, poetically expressed in the Psalm, with the very fabric of my mind and heart. God is to be praised and loved and adored, because he truly forgives all our sin and heals all our infirmities. I am not now entering into the debate about divine predestination and freewill, or providence and the responsibility of belief. Whatever free will we possess, and whatever responsibility is left to us in belief, freedom and faith are themselves never independent of God's grace and presence in our lives. God loved us before we loved him, and while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.

To say that God forgives all and heals all is to look at things from the divine perspective. It is as if we look out, along with Jesus, from the vantage point of the cross. We look upon the misery of wretched souls, souls who labor under the burden of their mortality. And as we gaze from the cross, mindful of the power that flows from Jesus' perfect sacrifice, we are able to say with T. S. Eliot, "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

I believe this, and while this belief does not mitigate the actual pain, or minimize the suffering, it instills in me, and in those who are sick, a confidence in the love and goodness of God. He is not far off but near, nearer than we are to ourselves, nearer even than our pain and fear. And feeling his presence, we know that he is near in his goodness and that his design will have a perfect end.

In a way this reality of God's presence and the vantage point of the cross stands outside of time, for what God does for us does not fit into a schedule that we might want, but rather into the seasons of God's grace. And yet with the most profound comfort his presence extends directly into time, at just the right time, to make us know that his power of love will not be lost on his beloved.

God is always present in his mercy and grace but there are also precious moments in the ministry when this reality of God's presence becomes self-evident. A couple of wonderful instances come to mind.

When I was a Deacon at Christ Church, Frederica, I was given the responsibility to attend to the communions of infirm members of the parish.

There was one gentleman in the nursing home, who had been stricken with polio as a child, and had no use of his legs, or the entire trunk of his body, and only limited use of his arms and hands. In a way, he became only his head, talking with a strained and guttural voice. Although he was very bright, he had had a limited education, and had worked as an electronic technician, doing as much as he could in a restricted condition.

One day I took him communion, and as our custom was, we went into the solarium for some privacy. We began our service, but after the reading of the Epistle, just as I was proceeding to read the Gospel, he began to interpret the Epistle! I have never heard a more beautiful and cogent exposition of Scripture.

It was not our usual practice to interrupt our communion with a spontaneous exposition of what a passage of Scripture meant. It has not happened to me since. But that time I found myself wonderfully astonished, captured in a moment's beautiful reflection on a biblical passage, by a man whose history and physical stature had little to offer to the world on its own terms, but whose heart and mind were storming the gate of heaven.

There was another time I was visiting a grand lady of our parish who was dying in the hospital after being bed ridden for twenty years. She had not spoken or opened her eyes for several days. After saying a prayer I whispered to her, "God bless you" and proceeded to leave. And to her family's astonishment and mine, she opened her eyes slightly and said, "God bless you too." Hers was an act of sweet charity and the habit of a good will, even in the midst of death.

While these precious moments and others like them are not uncommon in the ministry, there are also many times when the grace that we are given is seen mostly in patience and long suffering. When our families experience the heart-ache of disease and calamity, our chief comfort is quietly waiting on the Lord. We wait for the outcome,

patiently trusting the Lord Jesus - who knows first hand what it is to suffer. And we remember that he has promised to be with us to the end of this world and into the next.

Our church family waits patiently now as our beloved William lies critically sick in the hospital. He has the very best of medical care. Our wait must be patient and long-suffering as we pray and hope for his recovery. We wait as William taught us to do in circumstances such as these, quietly and dignified. Our confidence is sure that Jesus is nearer to him than we can fathom, and that God is doing more for him than we can desire or pray for. These are most difficult but precious moments in which we will honor William and magnify his Savior and ours, who forgives all our sin and heals all our infirmities.

**The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker**

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