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THE PRACTICE OF HOPE

When Jesus came healing the sick and raising the dead, he was demonstrating in action what he had been preaching in word – the gospel of the coming of God's kingdom to save and deliver man from the evils that oppress him. In works of power he confirmed the truth of the word he preached. Thus he healed the sick and raised the dead, not because bodily life, health, safety and ease in this world are absolute goods, or because he had come to establish an earthly paradise, but always as signs referring to something beyond themselves, the new spiritual life of man in the Kingdom of God. By his power to heal the body he demonstrates his authority to heal the soul, in the forgiveness of sins; and to grant the definitive healing of the whole human, body and soul alike, in the world to come, in the resurrection of the dead. And therefore when he restores sight to the blind and makes the lame walk, they rise and follow him, praising God, in the obedience of faith, and in the power that their restored health gives them.

A Christian is "only human": in the face of illness he will hope and pray for life, health, and safety in this world. And yet in doing so, he knows that these benefits are not absolute goods. Bodily life and health and safety in this world are opportunities for us to believe, love, and serve the Lord, but the definitive health and salvation of our entire humanity is found only in the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body to life everlasting. It is only as we are raised to new spiritual life and health that our bodily life and health finds its meaning and purpose.

Christian hope in the face of illness and death therefore runs on two levels. In sickness we dare to hope that the Lord would raise us up and restore us to bodily health again – that we may believe and serve him. In death we dare to hope that God would raise us up to life everlasting of body and soul, that we may glorify and enjoy him for ever. These are not different hopes, much less contradictory ones: they are the same hope, in different contexts, the same confident expectation that by his power God will bring us to himself, without loss or impoverishment. "This is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day" (John 6:39).

Such is the hope in which Christian faith faces sickness and death. The purpose of the Church's ministry in illness and bereavement, is to encourage us to lay hold of this hope.

The Visitation of the Sick. In any serious illness, even when there is no great threat to life, it is most fitting for Christians to ask for the rites of Visitation (Prayer Book, pp.308-323). In its simple form, it is a ministry of Prayer and Exhortation to acts of faith, repentance, reconciliation, and charity. It may be augmented by Confession and Absolution (either general or particular), Unction (anointing with blessed oil, or laying on of hands) for healing of soul and body, and Holy Communion. In these rites we learn in our weakness to rely more fully on the strength of Christ (2 Corinthians 12:9) to bring us to new life of body and soul. It is most fitting expression of love for family and friends to take part in these rites.

Last Rites: The more critical the illness, the more important are the rites of Visitation named above, as expressions of Christian hope in the face of death, as we look for a wholeness of body and soul that lies beyond this life. At such times the Holy Communion is fittingly administered as "Viaticum" – "way-bread", food for the journey, " the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, who preserveth thee from the malicious enemy and leadeth thee into everlasting life". In addition the Prayers for the dying (Prayer Book, pp. 317-319) may be said with family and friends. It concludes with a form of the ancient and beautiful Commendation of the soul to God's mercy: "Depart, O Christian soul, out of this world. In the Name of God the Father Almighty who created thee. In the Name of Jesus Christ who redeemed thee. In the Name of the Holy Ghost who sanctifieth thee. May thy rest be this day in peace, and thy dwelling-place in the Paradise of God".

The Burial of the Dead. The reverent committal of the body to the earth or sea (normatively by burial, although cremation is also permitted) is an act of hope in the resurrection of the body. The Burial office (psalms, lessons, prayers, and the committal of the body) is therefore carried out in the presence of the body in the church or at the grave-side. In the church the casket is brought into the church, reverently covered with a rich cloth known as the pall, a sign of our continued fellowship with the departed, and our hope for resurrection of this body.

Requiem Eucharist. In addition to the Burial office, the Eucharist may be administered (Prayer Book, p. 268). It derives its name from its ancient introit: "Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them." We pray for the rest, peace, light, and refreshment of the faithful departed in paradise, giving thanks that we are "heirs through hope of [God's] everlasting kingdom, by the merits of [Christ's] most precious death and passion".

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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