

Epiphany V
February 5, 2006
Fr. Jerry Thompson

Over the past several weeks I've been re-reading the *Harry Potter* series. I finished it yesterday, and as I came to the end of the sixth book, I thought about our first reading for today.

You see, at the end of book six a major character in the series dies. When Book Six originally came out and my son Andrew and I read it, we had a discussion about whether this character really did die or something else was going on other than what appears to be happening. I know that others have wondered the same thing. At the time of my original reading, I thought that something else was going on; on re-reading it, though, I think that the character did indeed die. I guess we'll all have to wait for Book Seven to come out to really know.

But to return to my experience yesterday, here I have been, reading the series, one book after another, totally absorbed in them to the point that I found myself dreaming about them. In other words, I was deeply involved in these stories. So when this character dies, I felt very real grief—no doubt connected also with the death of my father last September. Part of me wanted Elisha to show up and breathe this character back to life. Such is the power of story. And such is our ambiguity about death.

I wonder how many of us have prayed for healing, whether for ourselves or for someone we love. Each week we all pray for the health and wholeness of the people who are ill with one disease or another. Cancer, of course, is a major disease on the list.

As we heard, our first reading is a story of the prophet Elisha bringing a child back from the dead. Perhaps a different kind of healing. Among other things, this reading reveals the ambiguity most of us feel about death, even those of us who believe that death itself *is* a kind of healing. Especially if a death comes in an untimely manner, or more untimely than usual, we long for it to be reversed. Maybe our ambiguity arises because death is also an act of faith, of trust in a loving and welcoming God. There's this odd combination of a process that is a natural part of a life that requires of us a trust that is *extraordinary*—because of living into it on a day to day basis doesn't always come so naturally. I bet we could get a good discussion going if I were to ask what people in the congregation believe about healing.

Yesterday, members of the Diocesan Order of St. Luke the Physician met here at St. Mark's on the Campus. This group is a group that devotes itself both to the subject of healing and to the practice of healing through prayer. Those of you who belong will let me know if I misrepresented you, but I don't think that I did. And if you read the newspaper, you might have noticed that in yesterday's "Values" section there was a large article about Christian Science. Practitioners of Christian Science look to prayer as the *first* and *primary* approach to healing. Some also use medical doctors and others do not.

I'm reminded of many conversations I've had over the years with people who commented ironically that prayer was not the *first* but the *last* thing they thought of in various situations. Sometimes that's an overstatement, but there is a bit of truth in the experience that many of us might share.

Some of us sitting here this morning believe that God does miraculous healings. Some of us do not. And some of us aren't sure what we believe. For most of us, the question crosses our path at some point in our lives. There are the stories out there of people who have witnessed what they would call miraculous healings. And there are those who say, well why would God choose to heal one person and not another?

And of course, the entire conversation is deeply affected by the fact that physical health cannot be equated with wholeness any more than mere physical existence can be equated with life.

We don't usually talk about it in these terms, but health properly understood in the Christian tradition is linked to salvation, which at its base means wholeness. That's why we might talk about death as a healing, because, we believe—that is we trust—that, with death, we are brought into full wholeness in Christ.

But there's that ambiguity again. Even when a death is sought after—for example after a long difficult illness—even when death is a relief and has been prayed for, we grieve our loss as well as give thanks for the end of suffering and the relief it brings to us all. And in so many other kinds of situations in which we

pray for physical healing, we're willing to *accept* death as a healing if that's what happens, but generally we're not really very wild about the idea.

"Let this cup pass over me, yet your will be done." I'd rather not have to deal with this reality, God, yet if you say I must, then I will. I'm not sure that the Lord God always gets a fair shake with that prayer. If we believe that God can always change everything like we move chess pieces on a chess board, I suppose so. But lots of us don't believe that God acts in that way, do we? Certainly not all the time. Speaking of ambiguity.

I find myself as fascinated by our prayers for healing as much as I am by anything else. What is it that we are truly seeking from God when we pray for healing for ourselves or for someone else? Sometimes we do literally want a person to be healed physically and continue in this life with us; we have a sense that death is not right, that the threat of death is coming from outside the natural order of things. At other times we pray out of desperation because we don't know what else to do.

And there are no doubt any other number of reasons we pray for healing. At the bottom of them all, though, it seems to me that we want what is best for ourselves, and for those whom we love. With our prayers we are placing the situation and the people in it into the hands of God, because we are deeply aware of our own limitations.

When we say "your will be done," we are sometimes saying, "It would be presumptuous of me to think that I know what finally is best for this person in this situation. You, God, know far better than I. And your hands are far more adequate than my own to bring it about—whatever that means." Our prayers are a reflection of our trust in one beyond ourselves.

At the heart of things death is a mystery, as is life, as is the *complete* meaning of health, and wholeness and salvation. We grasp glimpses of what lies beyond the mystery as it shines through Jesus and one another and all of creation. As God speaks through scripture, and poets and scientists and story in order to help us see *more* than mystery, to help us shape our lives and our prayers in a faithful way.

And because of these grace-filled glimpses, we *trust* where otherwise we might have a great deal of trouble trusting in the basic goodness of all that God has given us. Not because we completely understand what it all means, nor because the full implications of placing ourselves and those we love in God's hands are clear, nor because we understand why someone might or might not be healed. We trust because our hearts tell us that in God's hands is where we all need to be and long to be, and ultimately, find ourselves to be.

And those hands are the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ, who does all that he can do to love us, who always wants the best for us, and goes to any length to give us what truly is best for us all.