

**Sermon Preached by Rev Scott Holmes**  
**at Christ Church South Yarra at Evensong on Sunday 17 October 2010**  
**Eve of the Feast of St Luke the Physician**  
**and on the attendance of members of Changing Attitude Australia**

'Then give the physician his place, for the Lord created him;  
do not let him leave you, for you need him.' *Sirach 38: 12*

Words that remind us that we are on the eve of the Feast of St Luke, the physician, and how true they are. I am a person who makes great use of doctors. To begin with I have chronic high cholesterol, a condition which I have inherited from both my parents and which can't be controlled with diet. Alas, the standard pharmaceutical treatment for hyper cholesterol is a drug which my body does not tolerate in large doses, so I am on a regimen of a lower dose of two other drugs which work very well together, but which has to be monitored pretty regularly. Having heart disease on every branch of my family tree, I also now have a cardiologist, although at this stage I don't need to see him often at all, presuming that I keep up my exercise. Then there is the mild but chronic seborrheic dermatitis, a skin condition which is virtually impossible to get rid of, and which flares up at various times. At its best I can keep it under control with a tea tree based ointment, but at its worst I go on antibiotics. For this I am under a dermatologist. Which is just as well, because with my Anglo-Saxon skin and a tendency to enjoy the sun, I also am prone to basal cell skin cancer. I've already had three off, and every six months the dermatologist runs his trained eye over my body to hunt for the next culprit. Then, just for fun, I also see my doctor on a regular basis to syringe the wax out of my ears, as I have very narrow ear canals which easily become completely blocked. All this is without any consideration of the occasional cold and flu, sprains and pulled muscles, and other irregular aches and pains, not forgetting regular trips to the optometrist. Yes, give the physician his place, and while you're at it, give thanks that he bulk bills.

But let me pose a question after that long list. Am I healthy? What does the presence of these medical conditions in a 48 year old male say about my health? Indeed, what does it say about the meaning of health? To my way of thinking, I am healthy. I'm not

healthy in the same way that you are healthy, I live with a whole set of medical parameters that I have to manage, just as each of you lives with a set of parameters that you have to manage, but that's just the way it is. If we pooled our various lists and tried to come up with a very specific definition of what a healthy person looks like I think we would struggle to do so. We can, of course, come up with some general guidelines and ideals which can apply across the board, and which are very helpful, but, in the end, how each of us defines health is a personal decision based on what we know of ourselves and our bodies, our values, and our hopes.

In scripture and, to a lesser extent, within theology, there is a strong connection made between physical health and spiritual health. There are numerous stories, for instance, of Jesus healing people, in which he seems to make a connection between their healing and their faith. There are numerous stories in the Hebrew Scriptures in which ill-physical health is a sort of symptom of ill-spiritual health. What might we make of these connections? The tendency is to say, 'well, the people of old didn't know much about health and medicine, so when they were trying to find a reason for illness they thought that sin was the best option.' I suspect that this idea was at least part of what was going on. But I also wonder whether there is a deeper wisdom in these connections, a deeper wisdom that understands that spiritual health, like physical health, is not something that can be described by some universal, one size fits all definition. That spiritual health, salvation, righteousness, whatever you want to call it, has a personal dimension based, just like physical health, on what we know of ourselves and our bodies, our values and our hopes.

For many, perhaps for most Christians, this probably sounds like a radical and heretical idea. We are so used to the notion that faith is about assenting to a set of specific and universal propositional statements and then following a set of specific and universal rules. It is comforting for us to think like this because it makes it easy to work out who belongs and who doesn't, who thinks like me and who doesn't, who I can trust and who I can't. In the midst of a complex and changing world, we are drawn, I suspect, to less complex and less variable models of faith which seem to provide a place of safety. And we all live, in the depths of our being, with questions and doubts about our own worth, and so are drawn to a model of faith with a set of rules that makes it easy to calculate whether we indeed are worthy or not. I fully appreciate why it is that this one size fits all model of faith is so appealing. I just have

two little problems with it: I don't think it accords with reality, and I don't think it accords with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Maybe they are not such little problems.

So let's talk about sex. Not just because I'm here representing Changing Attitude Australia, not just because it's fun to talk about it, and even more fun to do, but because of all the areas of life where the one size fits all model of faith seems preoccupied with prescriptive rules it is in this area. Not that there are a lot of rules, but they have a certain unavoidable dominance. Indeed it seems to be fast coming to the point in some quarters where one's views about homosexuality are almost the only measure of one's authenticity as a Christian. I find this obsession with rules about sex intriguing. Why does it have so much more dominance than rules about prayer, or attendance at worship, or alms giving, or other forms of assistance to the poor, or gambling, or any other number of things? Why is that every year at our Synod we have a veiled motion suggesting that being anything other than straight is a sin, but no motion suggesting that not appearing at worship every Sunday is a sin? Surely the second of these would have far greater impact on our faith and evangelism? Why are we so obsessed with what people are doing with their bodies when in fact we don't actually know for sure what anybody is actually up to in the privacy of their bedroom? The conclusion I've come to is that we are obsessed with the rules about sex precisely because the sexual reality we all live in is one in which no amount of rules actually helps us. Sex is a chaotic, complex, powerful, messy aspect of human living. The lessons from history, biology, sociology and psychology are that sexual expression and practices do not fit into narrow definitions. And most of us here, if we are really honest, know that for ourselves, often fearfully so. Why else is it that sex sells? Why else is it that the internet is awash in pornography? The one size fits all model of faith attempts to respond to this complexity by suggesting that if we only follow a set of rules we will be spiritually safe and healthy. I believe this is a response driven by fear and I don't believe there is any evidence that it is true. Indeed the evidence as I read it from such practices as celibacy and from organisations which attempt to 'fix' people who are gay is that such repressive approaches have precisely opposite outcomes – they lead to a lack of psychological and spiritual health.

Is the one size fits all model of faith in accord with the Gospel of Jesus? This is, of course, something of a loaded question, which begs all sorts of other questions. Can

we differentiate between the different layers of history of Christian faith in the 1<sup>st</sup> century? What authority do we give the church to define what orthodoxy is? What is the relationship between personal faith and religious belief? Acknowledging the presence of such questions, let me attempt to give my response. I see very little in the Gospels that suggests to me that Jesus was concerned with formulaic beliefs and rules. I see a lot in the Gospels that Jesus was concerned with freedom – freedom from ill health, from prejudice, from oppression, and from the external imposition of religious rules. I think we can see in the other New Testament writings that the first Christians relished and flourished in this freedom, that it was the hallmark of the early church, in which old prescriptive definitions of spiritual health were swept aside and people discovered a common humanity that breached all the existing divisions. Sadly, I also think we can also see that by the end of the first century there was a reaction against this expression of faith. The Pauline corpus is fascinating in this regard. In the earlier documents Paul can say there is no longer male and female. In the later documents somebody writing in Paul's name says that women must be quiet in church. Clearly, the one size fits all model of faith has always tempted us.

Let me be more personal. In my own spiritual journey my experience has been that the greater I strive to be a holy person, the more I must come to terms with my own odd uniqueness, of which there is a great deal!, and the less I have any basis to impose on anybody else expectations about what to believe or what rules to follow. What equates to spiritual health for me can never be the same as what equates to spiritual health for you, because the parameters in which each of us seek spiritual health are not the same. Yes, we may well be able to agree on some general guidelines, of which I would include such things as the importance of compassion, of accepting change, of meditation, of connectedness with creation. But the healthy spiritual life we want for ourselves and each other is based on what we know of ourselves and our bodies, our values, and our hopes. And this includes our sexuality. I don't think God cares who we have sex with. I do think God cares whether we use sex to manipulate other people, or whether we use sex to avoid dealing with other issues in our lives, or whether we are too afraid to have sex with anybody. Who you enjoy having sex with is a matter of biology and psychology. What you do with the sex you're having is a matter of spiritual health and holiness.

I wish we didn't have to go on and on about these matters. I wish there was no reason for an organisation like Changing Attitude Australia to exist. But for better or worse the issues around human sexuality highlight the sorts of directions facing us both as spiritual individuals and as spiritual organisations. We need to critique the one size fits all model of faith and expose the potential damage it does by imposing on us expectations about what it means to be holy people that have no basis in our experience either of the Gospel or our humanity. And we need to speak more boldly about a model of faith that understands that spiritual health is not a one-size-fits all solution. Perhaps we would do well to remember that part of the Hippocratic Oath which maybe St Luke himself knew about:

I will prescribe regimens for the good of my patients according to my ability and my judgment *and never do harm to anyone.*