

Trinity College Cambridge

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Scenes from the Life of Christ: Healing

2 Kings 25: 8–12 Philippians 1: 19–26

The Stigmatization of St Catherine of Siena, Rutilio Manetti

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Of course, you'll think I'm cheating. The subject is 'Scenes from the Life of Christ: Healing' – you might, not unjustifiably, have expected to see 'The raising of Lazarus' by Giotto or the 'Healing of the paralytic' by Murillo. But healing? The picture before you breathes just the opposite. Far from an image of the life of Christ, this picture speaks of the death of Christ – there he is – an image of him hanging on the cross in the throes of dying.

And healing? Hardly – those rays emanating from the crucifix certainly have their destination in a human being, but far from healing whoever it is, they seem paralyze the woman, who faints in a swoon, her grey complexion and closed eyes giving an unsettling picture. Less the 'Life of Christ and healing' than the 'Death of Christ and sickness'.

The subject is the 'Stigmatisation of St Catherine', painted in about 1630 by Rutilio Manetti. According to Catherine's biographer, the Blessed Raymond of Capua, the stigmatisation took place on 1 April 1375 in the chapel of Santa Cristina in Pisa. Catherine described her experience to him in the following terms: 'I saw the Lord fixed to the cross, coming towards me in a great light, and such was the impulse of my soul to go and meet its creator that it forced the body to rise up. Then from the scars of His most sacred wounds I saw five rays of blood coming down towards me, to my hands, my feet and my heart'. It was a spiritual privilege granted to only the most holy of God's people – the sharing of the wounds of Christ with a human being – the most famous, of course being the stigmata granted, in the last years of his life to St Francis of Assisi. Indeed, this image and its subject proved a highly controversial topic in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It ranged the Dominicans against the Franciscans, the latter claiming that the privileged position of their founder, Francis, who had been the first to receive the stigmata, was being usurped by this newcomer, Catherine and her stigmata. It was all political propaganda, they reckoned. Indeed, as it happened, the row continued until Pope Urban VIII decreed in 1630 that Catherine really had received the stigmata – this painting was presumably painted to celebrate the authentication of that happening, 300 years before.

So, there it is. Life – in the form of blood – coming from a dead or dying Christ. Healing, but in the form of giving wounds. It all seems hopelessly upside down and contrary and quite the opposite of what we've come to expect from our gospel reading of the healings, in which health – of mind and body – is restored in ways we can all understand. You could say – 'but this is very much part of the medieval world view' – crucifixes spoke – the rood at Boxley Abbey on the Pilgrims' Way twitched and winked – but I think we'd be unfair in seeing this as somehow medieval simplicity and artifice.

Because, when we delve deeper, we realise that so much of what we might call the 'Life of Christ' is associated with experiences far removed from his earthly life in Galilee and Jerusalem. I guess most of the images in this present series will be based on incidents described in the gospels – the 'Life of Christ'. But the 'Life of Christ' is not just Galilee and Jerusalem. We are used to receiving the 'Life of Christ' in Holy Communion, under the form of bread and wine – wherever we are. There indeed, you have an example of the 'Life of Christ' given to others through a reminder of his death. And we are positively encouraged to experience the 'Life of Christ' in our own lives, and not to feel we have to go to the Holy Land to learn about him.

So, to me, that crucifix emanating blood says, in a way which we might find strange – the 'Life of Christ' comes to us, through his death. The 'Life of Christ' isn't just about scenes from the gospels. The 'Life of Christ' comes from what the world would call failure and death. Only when we get that paradox in our minds can we really begin to understand what is truly at the heart of our faith.

Then what about the healing? In most paintings of gospel healings, there is a re-emergence of health – the ear of Malchus, chopped off by Peter, is reconstituted; the man with the withered arm suddenly finds he can wave; the paralytic lying on his pallet picks it up and walks. But not here – those rays of so-called healing seem to provide just the opposite effect, with bleeding wounds on hands, feet and heart. So much so, that poor Catherine looks decidedly the worse for wear.

Again, we are dealing with the world of paradox. When Christ heals, he may indeed bring healing which we, as humans will recognise – depression lifted, an ailment long suffered cured. At Hereford we have, amazingly, a surviving pre-Reformation shrine – that to St Thomas of Hereford, canonized in 1320. Hundreds of people came from all over England to his shrine at the end of the 13th century, and as a result of an intensive inquiry, 450 healing miracles were documented – second only to what we, at Hereford call, rather disparagingly, 'the other Thomas' – Becket at Canterbury, where 650 healings were documented – not that we're counting! All these were healing miracles which you and I could recognise – the lame throw away their crutches, the blind suddenly see, a hanged man is restored to life. But all this is only one side of Christ's healing. Christ's healing also involves allying ourselves with that crucified one and if not receiving physical healing, perhaps being given the strength to bear whatever it is we have to bear.

We have another saint at Hereford and he's the Saxon king, Ethelbert, beheaded by King Offa in 794. Around his shrine are these words of Jesus from Luke's gospel – 'All who want to be followers of mine must renounce self – day after day they must take up their cross and follow me'.

Strangely, that taking up the cross, Christians have found, generation after generation, leads to healing. It's not for everyone, thank God, to experience that healing through wounds to hands, feet and heart, like Francis and Catherine, but that aligning ourselves with the Passion of Christ is something we seek to do in far less dramatic ways day by day – by putting others first, through sacrificial generosity to those in need – through finding meaning in what life throws at us.

And lastly, that image says something to me about Christ and healing and death. That is, that all our healings – whatever form they take in life – however dramatic they may be – will, one day, end in death. Christ's healing can't go on for ever? Or can it? It depends how you look at it. In some ways, that picture of St Catherine looks like a mini-death. And perhaps it's when we embrace the mini-deaths that happen to us along the way – the wounds – the stigmata – and their healings – that we become daily more prepared for that final and great healing, which is life with Christ for ever.

A contemporary writer James Roose-Evans puts this far better than I and it's with words of his that I end:

Exactly how we go through that last door, how we die, will depend on how we respond to the many hourly, daily, yearly experiences of dying that we encounter in our lives, how we respond to the dying of a hope, a dream, a friendship, an ambition, a passion. If we learn how to live through each of these miniature deaths, each lessening of the ego, then each of them will become a resurrection, and we shall come at last to those ten thousand several doors with joy and gratitude, humility and trust.