

In normal times, one might read this passage from Acts and pick out four key points:

1. The religious authorities arrest Peter and John for speaking the truth (4:3).
2. When they examine Peter, he is given the words he needs by the Holy Spirit (4:8).
3. The authorities had no answer to what Peter had said; after all the man he had cured was standing before them (4:14).
4. All they can do is threaten Peter and John and hope these threats will silence them but Peter and John reject these threats (4:20).

We have here a blueprint for how the church should act; to speak without fear, confident that the Holy Spirit will give us the words when our time comes.

But today, I am especially drawn to 4:12; Peter says; 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.'

We echo these words in our monthly service of healing and wholeness when the priest says to those upon whom hands have been placed, '*May you believe and trust that the only name under heaven given for health and salvation is the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*'.

Does this mean that Christians are called to believe that modern medicine is a pointless exercise and that we will be healed through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ?

A couple of days ago I watched some interviews carried out with people in the United States who were protesting against the lockdown there. Two women told their interviewer that they had no need for social distancing because they were protected by a higher power. I wondered if their stance was based on these words that the Holy Spirit gave to Peter? Why did they believe God would protect them from the Covid 19 virus but not from whatever illness would eventually end their earthly lives? Did they believe that their neighbours were also protected by a higher power? If they were not, why did they not feel under obligation to keep their neighbours safe through social distancing?

The healing miracle that Peter performed brought many new believers to the church. The miracle gave Peter a platform to proclaim the truth of the promise of salvation through Jesus Christ so that the religious authorities had no answer to what he said. But eventually, the man Peter healed will have died.

It's the same when I lay hands on people and say a prayer. I have no idea how God will use my prayer. I am using words that have been passed down through the church through the Holy Spirit. And in any case we have been promised eternal life rather than immortality.

When the bubonic plague came to Wittenberg in 1527, Martin Luther and his wife remained in the city and opened their house to those who were suffering, tended their needs and prayed with people in the last days of their lives. He condemned those who sought to escape the plague by leaving the city. From this moral high ground he also had this to say about people who took no precautions at all.

It is even more shameful for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if he had taken care of his body as he should have.

He is thus responsible before God for his neighbour's death and is a murderer many times over. Indeed, such people behave as though a house were burning in the city and nobody were trying to put the fire out. Instead they give leeway to the flames so that the whole city is consumed, saying that if God so willed, he could save the city without water to quench the fire.

No, my dear friends, that is no good. Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate the house, yard, and street; shun persons and places wherever your neighbour does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city.

What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body? You ought to think this way.

We too can support efforts to heal our neighbour by taking all the precautions that we can, while also tending to our neighbour's needs when we are able to do so.

Here is the Church of England prayer for hospital staff and researchers written for these times:

*Gracious God, give skill, sympathy and resilience to all who are caring for the sick,  
and your wisdom to those searching for a cure.  
Strengthen them with your Spirit,  
that through their work many will be restored to health;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*