

Saturday after Ash Wednesday
Lenten Day of Recollection for Abbey School Alumni and Spouses
March 8, 2014

I am the farthest thing from an archeologist, but I do have a certain fascination for the work that such men and women do. The wife of one of my very first students has long been engaged in important excavations in the Holy Land, and a classmate of that same student has done remarkable scholarly work studying ancient inscriptions in Roman North Africa. In my amateurish way, I once read about a piece of limestone that was found among the ruins of the Roman colonial town of Timgad, located in modern-day Algeria. The stone had been broken into two pieces, found rather far from one another, and even they had some fragments missing, but when the two parts were put back together, the Latin words carved there by Christians of the fourth or fifth century could for the most part be deciphered. It was a prayer to Christ for healing, the key words being these: "I beseech you, Lord Christ, the only physician, come to the aid of those who are holy and of those who are doing penance."¹

That way of addressing Christ surely goes back to the final words of the Gospel we just heard, where Jesus says, "Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners" (Lk. 5:32). But it was not just some unknown Christian in ancient North Africa who spoke of Christ as a physician. In that same part of the world, and at roughly the same time, St. Augustine of Hippo rather often used such language in his sermons and commentaries. Among his most important works are his reflections on all 150 Psalms, and in one of these, on Psalm 17, Augustine said: "May a physician come to heal our ills. A physician? Which one? Our Lord Jesus Christ... He is in every respect the physician for our wounds.... He is in every respect our physician."

There are many such passages, not only in Augustine but in other Fathers of the Church, and there is a hint of this even in the monastic Rule of St. Benedict. To be sure, Benedict does not explicitly speak of Christ as a physician, but he clearly teaches that the abbot, as Christ's

representative in the monastery, must care for those who are spiritually sick. In chapter 27 of his Rule, he actually quotes the verse we heard in today's Gospel, even as he also recognizes that perhaps the abbot himself is not always the one who can best help the monk who has gone astray. Benedict writes: "The abbot must exercise the utmost care and concern for wayward brothers, because 'it is not the healthy who need a physicians, but the sick.' Therefore he ought to use every skill of a wise physician and send in ... mature and wise brothers who, under the cloak of secrecy, may support the wavering brother, urge him to be humble as a way of making satisfaction, and 'console him lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.' Rather, as the Apostle also says, 'Let love for him be reaffirmed,' and let all pray for him" (RB 27.1-4).

Benedict is there talking about some brother who has been especially troublesome and so for a while had to be ostracized or isolated from the rest of the community, but if we're honest we'd have to admit that in one way or another all of us are at times wayward, and there is surely no better time to examine our lives and seek improvement than during this season of Lent. Here at the abbey we sing a special hymn during Lent at the beginning of the service called Compline, that is, Night Prayer, and its very first line is an acknowledgement of having strayed from God, at least to some extent, during the course of the day. The hymn goes like this:

O Father, bring us back again
who on this day have strayed from you,
that, sheltered by your loving hand,
our nightly prayer we may renew.

Give us untroubled heart and mind,
so flooded with your tranquil light,
that nothing evil there may hide
to take away our peace tonight.

We thank you, Father, source of light,
with Christ your Son and Spirit blest,
who give the marvel of new day,
and, with the evening star, give rest.

The sentiments in that hymn are very much in accord with what St. Benedict says in the chapter of his Rule about the observance of Lent, where he writes: "We urge the entire community during these days of Lent to keep its manner of life most pure and to wash away in this holy season the negligences of other times" (RB 49.2-3). What he says there about a monastic community in particular is surely applicable to every Christian, whatever his or her state in life. For us Catholics, one way of washing away those negligences is through the sacrament of reconciliation, but it is also important to keep in mind that the Eucharist itself is a source of forgiveness, redemption, and healing. Consider just these few lines from the first of the Eucharistic Prayers: "Remember, Lord, your servants and all gathered here, whose faith and devotion are known to you. For them, we offer you this sacrifice of praise ... for the redemption of their souls, in hope of health and well-being, and paying their homage to you, the eternal God, living and true." Or think of the words all of us say just before Communion: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." Healed of what? Why, of sin! And who could doubt that the Lord is always ready to say that word of forgiveness and healing? Way back in ninth-century Ireland there was composed a beautiful prayer full of such confidence, addressing Christ Jesus specifically as our healer. You may have heard it set to music and sung by John Michael Talbot. If you haven't, I suggest you go to YouTube and listen to it. At the very least, ponder the words which I will here recite as the conclusion of this homily:

Healer of my soul
Heal me at even'
Heal me at morning
Heal me at noon
Healer of my soul

Keeper of my soul
On rough course faring
Help and safeguard my means this night
Keeper of my soul

I am tired, astray, and stumbling
Heal my soul from the snare of sin

Healer of my soul
Heal me at even'
Heal me at morning
Heal me at noon
Healer of my soul

1 *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, s.v. "Médecins," n. XXII.