

~Other Speakers S-Z: Valsan Thampu:

Sickness is a natural aspect of family life. It is necessary, therefore, that we develop a positive and spiritually sound attitude to sickness and caring.

The secular-technological culture sees sickness only in negative terms. It is an evil to be avoided or fought at all costs. More importantly, it is a calamity that compels us to have recourse to professional help and institutionalized care. Ever since the emergence of hospitals and the elaboration of health care, the focus of caring for the sick has shifted progressively from family to hospitals. This has resulted in the erosion of the caring nature of family.

Before hospitals and hospices began to mushroom, caring for the sick was one of the natural and basic responsibilities in family life. Even though sickness has always been a time of pain, trauma, stress and strain, sickness at home also served to deepen interpersonal relationships and reinforce the cohesion of family. The whole family rallied round the sickbed of a dear one, and did their best to make him feel cared for and valued. Sickness thus has had the “healthy” consequence of enriching human relationships and sensitivities in the family context.

We gloss over the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. We pay scant attention to the fact that soon after Jesus healed her of fever, she rose and ministered to the family. It is in sickness that, some times, we learn the profound truth that it is a greater privilege to serve than it is to be served. Physical ill-health, paradoxically, may contribute to spiritual health. To be holistically healthy, hence, one has to experience illness from a spiritually positive outlook. The blessedness of caring and serving is more poignantly obvious to those who, in suffering illness, were either cared for or suffered neglect. Those who have not been stung by life, in the form of illness or poverty or oppression, tend to be uncaring, shallow and insensitive.

Sickness, in the first place, by arresting the routine of life compels a re-examination of way of life we lead. It is our date with truth. In the routine of life, we tend to take each other for granted. On account of this, we rarely appreciate each other's worth adequately, or cherish the love and care that we enjoy in our homes. It is part of the perverse logic of human nature that we begin to appreciate the value of something only in losing it. The nice and noble sentiments we feel and express when a colleague retires “who is taken for granted while in service- is illustrative of this. Sickness causes a temporary disturbance of all that we take for granted. This can have the healthy effect of sharpening the edges of our appreciation and gratitude.

Secondly, sickness activates the logic of reciprocity in family life. This happens in two ways. Spiritually, the reluctance to be served when in need is similar in spirit to the reluctance to serve those in need. This was, incidentally, one of the lessons that Jesus taught his disciples “especially Peter- through the feet-washing episode (Jn. 13: 2- 12). Sickness comes as a reminder that we are not self-sufficient, that we need each other. Human life is designed on the logic of inter-dependence. The mystery of the Gospel is that even God respects this as the operating principle in relating to us. “Abide in me, and I in you,” said Jesus (Jn. 15:4). We need to depend on, and be sensitive to, each other. We are inter-dependent. The sick need to be cared for. Only those who are not sick can do that. That they must do, because those who are healthy today are sure to get sick someday, when they too will need care.

Sickness is the metaphor of a larger truth. It is not only in states of sickness and helplessness that we need each other. Even in health we are inter-dependent. Society exists and functions in terms of this principle. Skills and gifts are distributed among a people for this reason. But sin corrupts this reciprocal inter-dependence into a one-way traffic. In the family, for example, children receive limitless love and care from parents; but the more they receive, the less willing they get to care and to share. This points to ill health in family nurture. The world functions in terms of one-sidedness. Unless spiritual discipline informs human outlook and interactions, life will degenerate into a one-way traffic.

Sickness, by illumining the logic of inter-dependence, deepens relationships. Relationships are founded on reciprocity. Giving and receiving -the expressions of love in action- comprise the substance of relationships. But it is not only physical help that we are to give or receive. Our mutual sensitivity has to be comprehensive. A healthy family or society is built on the truth of human worth nourished by love. This breeds a whole range of appreciative sensitivities that deepen relationships. Love brings about a focus on the object of love. Sickness, in the ambience of love, focuses the attention of the whole family on the person in need; and, in so doing, further deepens love. Sickness activates compassion. Compassion is a cognate of love. It arises out of a state

of identification between two human beings. Compassion involves the overcoming of the distance between them. Love is the cementing force. Taking each other for granted, and the decline of sensitivities that goes with it, undermine the emotional and spiritual health of family life. Such a family is sick, even when all its members are in good health.

Third, sickness – especially of a serious kind- is a moment of truth for the individual concerned. We have a tendency to lounge through life, unmindful of its value and scope. While in good health, we rarely experience a sense of urgency about using our time, opportunities and talents maximally. We even tend to misuse or abuse our gifts. An episode of illness – involving either oneself or some one we greatly love- could make a radical difference in this respect. It could bring about a new earnestness about experiencing –fullness of life–.

This becomes amply clear in the event of death in a family. Nothing forces us to reckon honestly what we are doing with our lives better than the proximity of death. Death in the family, or friendship-circles, stings us into a deeper appreciation of the gift of life. But when relationships become shallow and merely functional, the quickening and positive value of death is lost and it becomes an empty ritual that leaves people unmoved.

It is significant that Jesus linked healing with faith. The practical truth is that it is during times of illness that a person's faith is quickened genuinely. That is because sickness interrogates the presumption of individual self-sufficiency. As a rule, the logic of trusting God does not become intelligible to us as long as we assume that we are sufficient unto ourselves. In such a state, we remain closed to the possibility of ever needing any help. This makes us resemble the Rich Fool in the parable who consigned himself to the illusion of material self-sufficiency. Before long death pricks the bubble of this widespread delusion.

This puts in perspective the dilemma of a Christian physician or healer. And it is central to our understanding of the –ministry of healing–. A pretense of being able to meet the health needs of patients is integral to the practice of medicine in the secular context. And the more medical technology develops, the more it aggravates this presumption of sufficiency. This rules out the scope for faith; unless it is faith in medical technology and doctors. The challenge of a Christian doctor is to function in this context in such a way that the centrality of faith in God is not diluted. After all, it is this faith that –heals;– whereas the best that medical sciences can offer can only –cure– the given symptom or disease. The absence of disease need not by itself denote health.

It is important for parents to realize that sickness in the family is an opportunity to train children in the art of caring. The same is true, also, of the presence of the elderly. Those who neglect their duties by their parents undermine the foundation for their own future well-being. It is not an accident that the emergence of nuclear families has eroded the caring culture of families. In such a context, parents must make special efforts to expose their children to situations of human needs and train them to respond caringly.

Hospitality is of the essence of home. Home is a place where people are valued and welcomed. At least, they should be. The rising apathy towards the elderly in the family context is a glaring symptom of ungodliness. This is, to a large extent, a by-product of an approach to life based on indulgence, which tends to distort our responses to others. More than in any other institution in the world, in family we should see each other in terms of our intrinsic, not instrumental, worth. The willingness to care –and care even at risk- can come only out of an appreciation of the immense value of every human life. We care only for those we value. Withholding care is, for that reason, a strategy to deny the worth of the person concerned.

Biblically seen, there is something sacred about the human predicament in sickness. God is in solidarity with the sick and the suffering in a special way. Sickness and health exist in the sacred space of God's divine authority and compassion. It is this spiritual conviction that constitutes the logic of the ministry to the sick. It is unspiritual, hence, to manipulate emotionally those who are helpless in sickness, as even well-meaning evangelists at times tend to do. There are times when the distinction between ministration and manipulation becomes tenuous. It needs to be noted that Jesus did not say a word that was manipulative or judgmental to the sick. Yet, he did not fight shy of the reality of sin underlying human ill-health, as in the case of healing the paralytic (Mk. 2: 1 ff). But his approach to the sick was remarkably free from any undue eagerness to impose his will on them or to nudge them into conformity.

The spiritual task in the context of family is not only to develop a caring culture but also, more importantly, to strengthen the foundations for health in family life. Jesus saw health as basic to –fullness of life–. Caring in the event of sickness also needs to be seen in this light. Sickness is not a state that God wills for His people. Rather, God's concern is that, sickness being inevitable in this imperfect world of ours, we should be able to respond wholesomely to human needs aggravated by ill-health. Ill-health is, at the same time, a call to health,

which is the prophetic element in caring. Caring for the sick fortifies our motivation to stay healthy and to maintain a wholesome lifestyle. Caring is an important ingredient of a sound family culture. The scope of caring should not be limited to nursing the sick at home. We must care for the family, not less than for the individual. Family too must be healed. This task assumes greater significance and urgency today; for family has become sick to an unprecedented extent. So we have to address the sickness of the family not less than that of its individual members. It is a pity that in the ministries of the Church, adequate emphasis is not being laid on meeting this crying need. The beauty in the ministry of Jesus was the balance he maintained between the individual and the family dimension of healing. To Jesus, the healing of Zacchaeus, for instance, was incomplete without going home to him so that salvation could come to his house as well. (Lk. 19: 9)

Family being the seed of society, it is inevitable that the ill-health of family infects society as well. A sick society, in turn, further undermines the health of individuals and families, creating thereby a vicious cycle of mutual infection and corruption. Ministering to the family is the key to a breakthrough in this context. The key to redeeming family is, in turn, the transformation of individuals. Personal sin, in turn, infects family and spreads to society in due course.