

## 2. Theological Perspectives on Health and the Health Mission of the Church

### 2.1. Health from a Biblical Perspective

The word "health", as it is used in health care today, is unknown in the biblical texts. Thus, it is no need to a Bible concordance to find out what the Bible has to say about this issue. We have to look for further contexts and, in particular, statements about what it means to be a human being and what gives quality to life.

Nevertheless, we find the word "health" used four times in the Norwegian Bible translation, each one occurring in the Old Testament, three of them in the Proverbs: "This (fear of God) will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones (3,8); "For they (my words) are life to those who find them and health to a man's whole body (4,22); "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones" (17,22). It is clear that these are words of wisdom, pointing towards the sources of the good life. The Norwegian translation of 1978 uses "helsebot" (translation; "good for health") in the first two of these references, the English translation of the NRSV<sup>1</sup> from 1989 uses *healing* on these two occasions and *good medicine* in the third.

This shows that the focus of the biblical perspective is dynamic and holistic in a way that links it to the understanding of what it means to be a human being: On the one hand, man is created from the dust of the earth and because of this is vulnerable; on the other hand, man is created in the image of God, created to good relationships with the Creator, with fellow human beings, and with nature. It is in the tension between these basic dimensions that man is exposed to disease and pain, but at the same time experiences the blessings of the good life. Man knows that he/she will return to dust (Ps. 90,3), but trusts in God who "remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103,14).

In the biblical sense, health means wholeness and wellbeing, and that all good relationships are intact. This is what lies in the word *shalom* that in our Bible is translated to "peace". We see this, for example, in the story about Josef when he asks his brothers about how his father is doing (Gen. 43,26). In this story, the Hebrew Bible uses *shalom*, whereas the Jewish translation to Greek (The *Septuagint*) uses "Is he healthy". The relationship to the extended family and to the immediate family is of fundamental importance.

The Norwegian word *health* also has a linguistic connection to that of being whole and to the processes that lead to wholeness (*healing* is another word for the same). This holistic perspective emphasizes that a human being is more than a body and that health therefore includes the mental, social and spiritual. At the same time, it does not undervalue that human beings are bodies. On the contrary, the Bible is clear in presenting the physicality of man as a basic condition of life. Thus, it is the body that most clearly tells us how we are doing. If anything happens to the body, other dimensions of the individual are also likely to be tipped out of equilibrium. Therefore, health is not perceived as static, but is conditioned through dynamic processes. These could be negative if man lives in a way that leads to negative consequences. Sin could result in disease. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel are warned against violating

---

<sup>1</sup> The New Revised Standard Version, published 1989.

the Commandments. Should they do so, then God would punish them through disease and illness (Lev. 26, 14-16, Deut. 28,22). At times, the impression is given that disease is always caused by sin or disobedience against the will of God. However, the picture is not clear-cut. The Bible also tells about people who have become ill without there being anything sinful about them; on the contrary, they are seeking comfort and help from God. Thus it is written: "The Lord will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness" (Ps. 41,3). On the other hand, the Biblical view of man will always hold an acknowledgement that human weakness has the potential to harm relationships. This recognition leads human beings to turn to God and ask for compassion. Compassion is shown through God's forgiveness of sins; that is to say, broken relationships are restored, and the sick are healed (Ps. 103,3).

Therefore, a great deal of emphasis is placed on hindering and preventing disease (Exod. 15,26; Deut. 7,15). The 215 health regulations in the Law of Moses have as their goal to promote wellbeing and peace in accordance with the covenant of peace God made with his people: "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed says the Lord, who has compassion on you" (Isa. 54,10).

Questions about wellbeing and health are therefore related to expectations about the care of God and salvation. This is the key message on the fourth occasion where the Norwegian translation uses the word *health*. The context is that the prophet portrays a vision he has received about the new time to come: "Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing" (Ezek. 47,12).

In the poetic literature, the theme of body and health is a recurrent theme. Gratitude and joy to God who has raised people up from disease and misery is expressed in songs of praise and worship. In lamentations, people describe their distress and despair. There is no cover up or rationalization of the distress. Typical for the tradition of lamentations is a detailed description of the distress and the insistence that our entire world of experiences is a concern of God. Questions related to body and health has always been important in people's religiosity. Changes in body and health as related to the process of aging are also described poetically (Eccles. 12, 1-8).

The stories about Jesus in the New Testament are presented as the fulfillment of this promise of food and health. This will be dealt with more extensively in the next chapter. Here we wish to state that the Gospel reflects the Jewish understanding of health as holistic and dynamic, although it is now presented in Greek language. The common Greek word for health, *hygieia*, is not used in the New Testament; on the other hand, the verb *hygienein* (to get well/to recover) and the adjective *hygies* (recovered) are used, as when Jesus asks the invalid at the pool of Bethesda, "Do you want to get well?" (John 5,7). When these words have been used, it can be in relationship to the "getting well" of separate body parts or of the whole person (Matt. 15, 31; Act 4,10). The greeting of peace in 3 John, 2 makes it clear that this is about wholeness, wellbeing and relationships; "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well".

In the broadest sense, health involves being included in the context social context of life as well as to partake in faith, hope and love. Thus, there is no coincidence that the last book of the Bible, Revelations of John, ends in a manner that resembles the vision of the prophet Ezekiel, but in this case with reference to "The throne of God and the Lamb", where the leaves on the tree of life are "for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22, 1-2). Statements like these reflect the biblical view of man in their emphasis that health is about wholeness and relationships. This is an important perspective to include in the health mission of the Church. It can contribute to an extended, but also more realistic, understanding of health. In our dealings with the concept of health, there must be room for both good and bad days, for the belief that it is possible to master life, and that wellbeing and wellness are possible, even when everything is not perfect. From this perspective, health is perceived as a gift and is therefore meant for enjoyment. At the same time, it provides us with a view of health as something we are responsible for preserving and promoting, knowing that the gift of life is more than good health.