

ANOINTING with Oil – in the Bible and Today

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Part I – Introduction

There are two main sorts of 'anointing':

- spiritual anointing with God's Spirit and
- physical anointing with oil.

I shall deal with them together because they often go together, and each throws light on the other. Both are of increasing interest among Christians today, especially among those who are rediscovering the importance of the Holy Spirit and/or those who want to deepen and enrich their expressions of the Church's Healing Ministry on Biblical principles.

Don't jump ahead to find out what to do, because what Christian anointing means comes first. In other words the '**What?**' comes before the '**How?**'. We need first to outline the uses of oil in the Bible and the meaning of anointing.

Part II - Oil & Anointing in Scripture

1) Oil - Its everyday uses in Scripture

Although society is nowadays very dependent on oil, we don't come across it in a very personal way.

In Bible times it was quite different. Canaan was the **land of olives** and oils flowed richly in the lives of those who lived there. Jesus's parable of the steward has a man who owed a hundred jugs of it! [Luke 16:6] In everyday life it was used for the following five things –

- Washing

A well known example is Jesus's teaching that we should not let others know when we are fasting. **'But when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others...'**

[Matthew 6:17-18.

When Jesus was being hosted by Simon the Pharisee, a woman anointed his feet. He turned to Simon and mentioned three things that he had omitted to do for him – his honoured guest: no water, no kiss, no anointing. So Luke 7:46 reads **'You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.'**

The context suggests that it was a kind act of refreshment in a sunny climate where skin dried quickly. Perhaps today's equivalent is the Eau de Cologne impregnated 'hot towel' that airlines use to pamper their First Class passengers!

See also Psalm 104:15.]

- Medicine

A familiar example comes in Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan. **'He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them'**. The oil was for softening the wound and wine was used as an antiseptic.

[Luke 10:34.

When the Psalmist sings (23:5): **you anoint my head with oil**, its literal basis lies in a shepherd's use of oil for his injured sheep.]

- Cooking

The widow of Zarephath admits to Elijah: **'I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug. I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for my son, that we may eat it...'**

[I Kings 17:12. See also Ezekiel 16:13.

The Lord promised that the **jug of oil would not fail** until he sent rain years later (17:14). This prefigured the new life by which God would raise her son. This Old Testament incident compares interestingly with Jesus's miracle at Cana (John 2:1-11), where wine is a symbol of new life.]

- Lighting

Jesus's parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids is based on oil.

'When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil...'

[Matthew 25:3-4 See also Exodus 25:6]

- Trade

Hosea complains about the tribe of Ephraim –

'...they make a treaty with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt.'

[Hosea 12:1. See also 1 Kings 5:10-11]

2) Oil in Scripture – for Life!

Oil was valued so much for its positive contribution to life that it became a symbol of the good life, not of sadness, but of gladness! So in Isaiah we read -

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me...

...to comfort those who mourn in Zion –
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

[Isaiah 61:1-3 (Verses 1 and 2 were read by Our Lord in the Synagogue, see section e).
Luke 4:18-19)]

Oil was frequently linked with wine in Scripture, that other symbol of joy and life. **Wine and oil** become synonymous with pleasure.

[e.g. **Whoever loves pleasure will suffer want;
whoever loves wine and oil will not be rich.** Proverbs 21:17

Note that in Hebrew poetry the second line is often parallel in thought to the first, so in these two lines, 'pleasure' and 'wine and oil' are, in fact, equated.]

The important thing to grasp is that oil is, essentially, not about sickness or death, but about blessing and LIFE!

The Jews did not anoint mourners: oil was not for funerals, but parties! It is hardly surprising that something so basic to life joined such things as water, bread and wine, as a rich and ready symbol.

The use of oil is mentioned over 200 times in Scripture, but half of the references concern its special usages.

3) Oil in Scripture - its Special Uses

The special use of oil was to indicate that he/she/it was **God's choice**. It indicated primarily that God was consecrating someone or something for his chosen use.

In the Old Testament the Israelites indicated this by anointing with special oil. The importance of this holy oil was such that it was a criminal offence to compound such oil for a common purpose.

[See Exodus 30:31-32 [The Lord said] '**This shall be my holy anointing-oil throughout your generations. It shall not be used in the ordinary anointing of the body...it is holy, and it shall be holy to you.**']

Objects that were specially anointed were –

- Items used in worshipping God (**tabernacle and its furnishings**)

[Exodus 30:22-29, 40:9-11 The first passage shows also how the oil was made.]

- Items used in fighting for God (**shields**)

[e.g. 2 Samuel, 1:21, Isaiah 21:5.]

People who were specially anointed were -

- People chosen by God to speak for him (**Prophets**)

[I Kings 19:16b]

- People chosen to lead the worship of God (**Priests**)

[Exodus 28:40-41]

- People chosen by God to lead his people (**Kings**)

[e.g. David in 2 Samuel 2:4, Solomon in 1 Kings 1:34, 39]

The following story comes from II Kings 9 and shows the importance and meaning of anointing.

4) Oil in Scripture – Anointing the King

Elisha sent one of his men with oil to Jehu to pour it on his head and anoint him King. The fellow arrived and extracted Jehu from his military staff meeting. On his return the generals asked Jehu 'Why did that madman come to you?'

Jehu stalled! '**You know the sort and how they babble.**' But they persisted: '**Liar! Come on, tell us!**'

So he said, 'This is what he said to me, "Thus says the Lord, I anoint you king over Israel."'

- The generals then ignored the one who had done the anointing.
- Their low opinion of him was no longer relevant.
- They threw down their garments in homage (as the Palm Sunday crowd did to Jesus).
- Blew trumpets.
- Proclaimed Jehu **King**.

[See 2 Kings 9, esp. vv.1-6 and 11-13]

Since it was **God who had acted** it was not a matter of debate!

When Samuel anointed the first King, Saul, he made it quite clear that the anointing did not come from himself, but from God .

Samuel took a phial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said. 'The Lord has anointed you ruler over his people Israel...'

[I Samuel 10:1.]

As this article is first appearing in the Jubilee Year of Queen Elizabeth, it may be interesting to some readers to be reminded that an anointing – based on Biblical practice – forms part of the Coronation Service.

Note that first a hymn was sung for the coming of the Holy Spirit. This included the words -

Thou the anointing Spirit art,

Who dost Thy sevenfold gifts impart.

Thy blessed unction from above,

['Unction' is a word less used than it was and is simply an alternative to the word 'anointing'.]

Is comfort, life, and fire of love...

Then followed a prayer –

O LORD and heavenly Father, the exhalter of the humble and the strength of thy chosen, who by anointing with Oil didst of old make and consecrate kings, priests and prophets, to teach and govern thy people Israel: Bless and sanctify thy chosen servant, ...

While the choir sang Handel's musical version of 1 Kings 1:39-40 **Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon King...**

Elizabeth, with her outer robes removed, knelt, and was anointed:

'Be thy Hands anointed with holy Oil.

Be thy Breast anointed with holy Oil.

Be thy Head anointed with holy Oil: as kings, priests and prophets were anointed...'

'Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who by his Father was anointed with the Oil of gladness above his fellows, by his holy Anointing pour down upon your Head and Heart the blessing of the Holy Ghost, and prosper the works of your Hands...'

[Details from Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Novello, 1953.]

My Hymn for the Jubilee contains this verse about the Queen:

Spirit, at her Coronation, through anointing you outpoured
many holy gifts and graces for her work, at home, abroad.
Day by day, inspire, equip her for her service of the Lord.

[Full text available in the HYMNS section of the website.]

The close link with the coming of the Holy Spirit was nothing new: in Biblical times it was so. **So Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.**

[I Samuel 16:13. See also Isaiah 61:1 quoted in the next section]

The King was seen to have a unique spiritual role for the nation was intended to be God-ruled, not King-ruled.

[Monarchy is King-ruled; democracy is people-ruled. Israel was, strictly speaking, a theocracy – that is to say God-ruled.]

As the King was the Anointed One par excellence, he became known simply as **the Anointed**. So the Psalmist sings:

Great triumphs he gives to his king
and shows steadfast love to his anointed,
to David and to his descendants forever.

[Psalm 18:50. Note that the structure of Hebrew verse means that **his king = his anointed**.]

5) God's Anointed One

In the Hebrew Old Testament the word for **Anointed** was **Messiah**.

When, over a century before Christ, the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek (into what would, later, be the language of the New Testament) the word they regularly used to translate the Hebrew word **Messiah** was the Greek word '**Christos**'!

While most Jews still await the coming of the Messiah, Christians believe that he came in the person of Jesus. At the start of his ministry Jesus claimed for himself Isaiah's words

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

...Then he began to say to them,
'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'
In other words, Jesus says – I am the Christ/Messiah/Anointed!

[Luke 4:18-19, 21.]

Simon Peter was the first to recognise who Jesus of Nazareth really was **You are the Messiah/Christ** (Mark 8:29) Because both titles mean exactly the same – the **Anointed One** – Bible translators have to opt for either **Christ** or **Messiah**.

[They are pretty equally divided, with more recent translations tending to opt for **Messiah** for this verse. Thus –

Christ comes in the King James Version, Revised Standard Version, New Century Version, New International Version, New American Standard, New King James Version and J.B.Phillips.

Messiah is the choice of New English Bible, New American Bible, Today's English Version, New Revised Standard Version and William Barclay.]

Sometimes the New Testament writers add their own translation for their readers' benefit. Thus John writes of Andrew telling his brother '**We have found the Messiah (which is translated Anointed)**' and also explains the Samaritan woman's remark to Jesus '**I know that the Messiah is coming (who is called Christ)**.'

[John 1:41 and 4:25 respectively.]

John's explanation of Andrew's remark is more usually translated **Christ**, rather than **Anointed**. For most readers, however, '**Christ**' does not explain '**Messiah**' as the word '**Anointed**' does.]

Immediately after the Coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Simon Peter was empowered to preach to the Gentiles at Caesarea (Acts 10:38). He naturally saw Jesus as supremely God's Anointed One.

'...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.'

[See also how readily the earliest Christians recognised God's anointing of Jesus. Acts 4:24-31, esp. v. 27. Note the close link with healing in this passage.]

6) God's Anointed People

So St. Paul speaks (not surprisingly) of Christians sharing Christ's anointing—
But it is God who

establishes us with you in Christ (Greek: Chris-tos)
and has anointed us (Greek: chris-as),
by putting his seal on us and
giving us his Spirit in our hearts
as a first instalment.

[2 Corinthians 1:21-22. Note in Old Testament times, the Israelites began to realise that they were God's anointed. Habakkuk wrote: **You came forth to save your people to save your anointed.** 3:13. This paved-the-way for the followers of the Anointed One / the Christ / the Messiah to feel that they shared his Anointing.]

The followers of Christ, the Anointed One, were incorporated into him by baptism.[Romans 6:3-4] They became one with God's Anointed, and in Christ shared his anointing. So, in 1 Peter 2 there is a fine description of Christ's 'anointed' followers which brings together many Old Testament ideas surrounding God's anointing –

...you are a chosen race,
a royal priesthood,
a holy nation,
God's own people [1 Peter 2:9]

The followers of Jesus were nicknamed '**Christ-ians**' first at Antioch

[...it was **in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'**. Acts 11:26.]

King Agrippa used the term

[**'Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?'** Acts 26:28]

It must have come from Gentiles (since no Jew would have dubbed them Christ's-followers believing, as they did, that Jesus was not the Christ!)

In our very name **Christians**, therefore, we declare our allegiance to and unity with God's **Anointed One / the Messiah / the Christ**.

From the 2nd century, '**Christian**' was accepted as a title of honour. By A.D.180, Theophilus, a Christian leader in Antioch wrote '**We are called Christians on this account, because we are anointed with the oil of God**'.

This reflects a very early development in the Christian church in which oil was used in initiation (e.g. baptism/confirmation), as it came also to be used later in Christian marriage, Christian ordination and (as we have seen) in the Christian coronation of a monarch.

For some readers Baptism will speak solely of water, but in many Christian churches, both east and west, past and present, oil also features and increasingly so.(The Church of England now allows the optional use of oil.)

[In the 'new' (i.e. A.D. 2000) Common Worship in addition to the two symbols of water and the sign of the cross, symbolic lights, oil and/or a white robe are also allowed.

If oil is used it can be used either sparingly or 'poured' – in truly Biblical fashion! It may be used on the occasion that the sign of the Cross is made, marking the candidate as Christ's own.

In the light of what we have seen in Scripture, no symbol could be more appropriate to emphasise that meaning.]

7) God's Anointing Spirit

As the appropriate use of oil is being increasingly rediscovered, it is easy to see why.

When Jesus was

- baptised with water,
- the Holy Spirit descended on him.

[As all the Gospels record.

Mark 1:10-11, Matthew 3:16-17, Luke 3:21-22, John 1:32-33.]

These two aspects are highlighted in Jesus's teaching '**Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born**

- of water
- **and Spirit.**' [John 3:5]

The water of Baptism relates vitally and importantly to the old life. It is a washing away of past sins and a dying with Christ of the old self.

[See e.g. Romans 6:3-4]

Water of Baptism symbolises God's cleansing of our past.

Oil in Baptism symbolises God's empowering for the future.

This double action is always necessary, and has been neatly expressed in the double petition of the chorus:

- Cleanse me from my sin, Lord
- Put thy power within, Lord...

In Titus we read

He [God] saved us, not because of any works of righteousness

that we had done, but according to his mercy,

through the water of rebirth

and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour... [Titus 3:5-6]

I have not so far said anything about the sick because any use of oil in ministering to them must arise from the Biblical picture that I have outlined. In Scripture -

OIL IS ABOUT –

- THE CALLING OF THE FATHER
- THE COMING OF THE CHRIST
- THE EMPOWERING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Oil is not about us or our sickness.

Oil is about the persons and work of God in Trinity.

It is not about sickness or dying but about empowering and new life!

Why is there less mention of oil in the New Testament?

Oil is mentioned more rarely in the New Testament because Christians did not continue the Jewish sacrifices and offerings. But there are other reasons. Oil symbolises God's Anointing.

● At Bethlehem God's Anointed One is visibly incarnate!

● at Pentecost, God's Anointing Spirit is almost visibly out-poured!

Since symbols are used to express what is not visible, one would not expect oil to be used as a symbol at times when Christ and/or his Spirit were both so evident!

What would it have added to Christ's ministry to the sick to use a symbol of himself, when the actual presence, prayer, word and touch of Christ himself was being experienced?

This surely explains why Christ himself did not anoint the sick, but his disciples anointed the sick and healed them when he was not visibly present [Mark 6:13] (see next section).

Also, as we shall see, James teaches it as a ministry to the Christian sick [5:14] There are no cases of anointing the Christian sick in Acts. Of the eight individual 'healings' in Acts, none comes into this category.

[On three occasions anointing would not apply: twice when the dead were raised (9:36-41, 20:9-12), and a deliverance/exorcism ministry (the demonised are not usually touched in the New Testament) (16:16-18).

The remaining five were the healings of the lame man; Saul/Paul's recovery of sight; Aeneas healed of paralysis; the cripple healed at Lystra and Publius' father cured (Acts 3:1-16, 9:17-19, 9:32-35, 14:8-10, 28:8). In no instance was it the healing of a sick Christian sending for elders. Saul was not baptised when Ananias ministered to him, nor did Saul summon him, nor was he yet a member of the Christian community.]

8) Anointing the Sick

There are two main texts.

Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits...

...So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

[Mark 6:7, 12-13.

Luke in his shorter version of Mark's account (9:6) accurately summarises repentance/forgiveness, deliverance and anointing under the general heading '**good news**' so he does not mention anointing as such. He has: **bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere** – as concise a sentence as one could wish for!]

The second passage comes in James's epistle in a section on prayer. (James 5:13-16), but first we must see a passage, written two centuries earlier, which forms the basis for the passage in James. Although the passage is not regarded by all Christians as Scripture, it gives a clear picture of how high a place a physician could be held in God's scheme of things.

Honour physicians for their services, for the Lord created them;
for their gift of healing comes from the Most High...

The Lord created medicines out of the earth,
and the sensible will not despise them...

...he gave skill to human beings
that he might be glorified in his marvellous works.

By them the physician heals and takes away pain;
The pharmacist makes a mixture for them...

My child, when you are ill, do not delay,
but pray to the Lord and he will heal you.

Give up your faults and direct your hands rightly,
and cleanse your heart from all sin.

Offer a sweet-smelling sacrifice...and pour oil on your offering as much as you can afford.

Then give the physician his place, for the Lord created him;...

There may come a time when recovery lies in the hands of physicians,

for they too pray to the Lord,
that he will grant them success in diagnosis
and in healing, for the sake of preserving life.

[Ecclesiasticus 38:1-2, 4, 6-8, 9-14.]

James writes as follows. I shall quote from the New International Version, not the NRSV. (The notes below tell you why!)

[The Greek is straightforward and uses 'he' as an inclusive word for male or female, - as English-speakers have done for centuries (until the recent policing of our speech to be 'politically correct'.) To be 'inclusive' in the modern style, the NRSV avoids 'he', and since English lacks a singular he/she word, its translators felt that their only option was to use they, and make the entire passage plural!

This is not particularly misleading until James writes concerning the sick person **if he has sinned, he will be forgiven.**

The politically correct avoidance of the word **he** led the NRSV translators to drop the word **if** and to render this **anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven!** As a general comment it might be true, but James was specifically writing about the sufferer and the enormous healing through God's forgiveness in his/her life. The N.I.V. remains true to James's text. I cannot imagine any reader would really assume that God's forgiveness did not apply if the sufferer were a girl or woman?!

¹³Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

¹⁴Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

¹⁵And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well;

the Lord will raise him up.

If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to each other,

and pray for each other so that you may be healed

The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

The influence of the Ecclesiasticus passage is obvious. But the most notable thing is that James bids Christians not, as one might expect, to send for the **physician** but to send for the **elders of the Church.**

Some feel that the elders' anointing is medical – and the positive relationship of Jesus to medicine would certainly not exclude this. Christ's relationship to medicine is outlined in the following notes:

[Christ used **saliva** on one occasion, **mud paste** on another; he commanded the blind man to **wash**, and for Jairus's daughter to be brought **food** (Mark 8:23, John 9:6, John 9:7, Mark 5:43 respectively.) Christ identified closely with the '**physician**' (Luke 4:23, 5:31) and his parable of the Good Samaritan used three of the nine Old Testament means of healing **wine, oil and bandages** (Luke 10:34.).

The approach of Christ was much nearer to the physician than to the miracle worker. He prepared people for ministry (Mark 7:33, 8:23); he gathered the right team (Mark 5:40).

He asked questions about the duration of the illness (Mark 9:21), and about the progress of healing (Mark 8:23b). He often asked searching questions of the sufferers themselves (e.g. Mark 5:9, 10:51, John 5:6, Matthew 9:28). He frequently gave advice & direction to the newly healed (Mark 1:43-4, 2:11, 5:19, 5:43, 7:36, 8:26, Luke 17:14, John 5:14, 9:35).]

[See my book *Question of Healing Services*, pp.59-63.]

In my view, had James wanted to teach that the Christian sick should be medically anointed he would most naturally have stuck closer to the passage in Ecclesiasticus and bid them summon the **physician**.

James is not excluding this, but in his passage on prayer he is saying that:

- the way to apply prayer to sickness is to summon **the elders of the church** for them to **pray** and **anoint**. It is most natural – and common sense – to ask spiritual leaders to engage in spiritual tasks, and medical experts to engage in medical ones. (Although we must guard against putting the spiritual and the medical in watertight compartments.) The Greek suggests that the **elders of the church** are to be called once.

[James changes his imperatives from the present tense to the aorist, and might be translated thus: Let him keep praying...let him keep praising...let him summon.]

- The **elders** act as representatives of the local Church, there is no mention of selecting an individual with a healing gift.
- The older passage only mentions **oil** in a spiritual context, i.e. in relation to the sacrificial offering of the patient/family. As Jesus renders such sacrifices obsolete, James transfers the use of oil to the Church's care-and-prayer of the patient. He does not explain it, but assumes that his readers know its significance.
- James avoids the pitfall of giving oil magical properties by placing its use fairly and squarely in the spiritual context of the **faithful prayer** of Christians which will **heal/save**, and of the Lord **raising up** the sick. James's use of these two words here links the healing both to **salvation** and **resurrection**.
- James's teaching is very modern in its corporate sense both of **sin** and **healing**, and also on the healing importance he places on the forgiveness of sins.

Part III - Ministering & Receiving Anointing Today

1) Background

The early Christians anointed liberally, as one would expect from what we have seen of the use of oil and its significance in Bible times. Early records tell of their anointing the sick all over, daily, for a week! It was generous and joyous, and rightly so because that is what oil symbolised.

Calvin (1509-64) and others taught that the New Testament miracles were something confined to the first century. Thus it was not pagans but devout and scholarly Christians who tried to do away with miracles!

The Reformers were rightly uneasy with the then Roman Catholic emphasis on anointing for dying rather than living, but, in spite of being 'Reformers', in their Book of Common Prayer (1662) they did not 'reform' the wrong use of anointing, but abolished it altogether! [A bad principle!] They did away with both Anointing and the Laying on of Hands and axed most references to healing. They promoted, instead, the opinion that sickness should not be resisted as it was God's punishment for sin. This held-back the Church's Ministry of Healing for three centuries!

2) The Context

The context is, of course, the Church's Ministry of Healing, which cannot be summarised here, and for which some understanding of healing, faith, prayer and sacrament is necessary.

[See my book *The Question of Healing Services*.

Details of this and other books still available from Renewal Servicing can be seen under the Renewal Servicing link on the home page of the website.]

Holy Communion and the Laying on of Hands with prayer are used mainly as sustaining ministries during illness, while Anointing is usually administered once as the passage in James seems to indicate.

Historically there were times when Christians tended to anoint daily at the beginning of an illness for perhaps a week, this seems to have been based on the clear expectancy of improvement.

3) Essential Meaning

In anointing a sick person we do not give them something abnormal and extraordinary because they are ill; it is the illness which is to be regarded as abnormal, not the anointing!

The oil is used to re-express, reaffirm, restore, repair and renew the sick Christian's unity with God's Anointed – the Christ. It is a ministry to Christians (as James teaches). The sick might be said to be re-Christ-ed. It brings all the healing, blessing and life the Anointing Spirit wants for God's Anointed People.

The oil proclaims our unity with Christ and expresses a restoration to fullness of life in him. Some have simply 'never bothered with anointing' (as a prominent Christian leader once admitted to me).

4) The Church

While the preparation of the patient is important, the preparation of God’s people is the more urgent and more difficult task.

When a minister anoints one of his people -

- He represents God’s people.
- Are they with him and behind him in this action?
- Does he represent the care, concern and commitment of the local church?

The importance of the laity cannot be over-emphasised. It is they alone who can make the action an authentic expression of the church. It is they who mainly comprise the local church, and make it, or prevent it from becoming, the caring committed community.

It is largely upon the laity that the responsibility rests for the ongoing committed care, prayer and support that the patient is going to need whatever the outcome.

The attendance of laity in small numbers should be encouraged if the ministry is to take place in a home. Representatives of both family and church should be present, for both sickness and its healing are corporate.

5) The Ministers

In the Early Church, lay-folk used to anoint, but soon, some tended to regard the oil as something magical and divorced from prayer, so the Church authorities restricted its use to priests in an attempt to check this.

Nowadays, even within the Roman Catholic communion, the use of oil by the laity is being once again encouraged.

Anointing usually takes place in the context, public or private, of a Holy Communion service, and is always closely linked with confession and absolution. This, together with the general Biblical theme of consecration, and the teaching of James’s epistle, indicates that it should be done by the local priests/ministers, or at least by their chosen delegates.

James indicates that the anointing is done **in the name of the Lord**. This means that it is not a casual or personal act, but an authoritative action. It is best done, therefore, by those whose Christian authority is recognised both by the sufferer and the Christian community which he/she/they represent.

6) The Sick

James 5:14-16 urges the sick person to **call for the elders of the church**. It is the **Christian sick** to whom James is giving guidance. He does not deal with the Church's ministry to non-Christians who are ill.

Like the other sacraments / sacramental acts, anointing is so related to Christ, and to God’s anointed people, that it is only appropriate within God’s family, the church. (In the same way that the Holy Communion is appropriate only to those who are ‘in union with Christ’.)

If the person is a non-Christian, then usually the preparation is such that they are led to Christ before the ministry is undertaken.

Sacraments and sacramental acts do not glorify God if administered casually, and, except in an emergency, the minister will usually guide the person to prepare for such ministry by reviewing their life with sufficient time and seriousness for the Lord to reveal hidden resentments, hurts and unconfessed sin.

In this age of instant everything, the preparation needs to be adequate and full. I knew of one person who was born blind and his eyes were totally shrivelled. He received spiritual direction for a year; he was anointed. His eyes became whole and he could see!

7) The Situations

Circumstances will dictate whether the anointing should take place in hospital, home or healing service.

Ideally it should take place in worship, and if possible at the Holy Communion service.

It makes it easier both for patient and congregation to be committed to one another if at least some of the local church family or its representatives are present. These might well include children and younger people. See my article **Children and the Healing Ministry**.

Oil should be available at Healing Services in case its use is appropriate for anyone present. To state the obvious: if it is not available it cannot be used, and may therefore deprive a sufferer of a ministry which God might will for them on that occasion. Its availability does not indicate that it will necessarily be used, or be used casually.

8) The Forms

An Order of Service, like any other pastoral tool, must be used with loving imagination, sensitivity and flexibility. The style and length of the service will differ according to the patient's illness and place.

The following ought, if possible, to be included :

1. Scripture and some exposition or teaching. This could take place the previous day.
2. Prayer. As the James passage makes clear, Anointing is part of a care and prayer ministry, it is not an impersonal substitute for it.
3. Setting aside the oil for God's use. Consecration of the oil might be done earlier, but it can be meaningful to the sufferer to be present when it is done. 'Grant, we beseech you, almighty Father, that by the operation of the Holy Spirit, this oil may be used for the healing of all infirmities. To those who receive it, and put their trust in your mercy, may this anointing be a heavenly medicine, a spiritual remedy, and inward and abiding unction, for the strengthening and healing of soul, mind and body, and for the renewal of the indwelling Holy Spirit within them.'

4. Holy Communion if possible. Such services bring together in a concise unity so many means of grace, that they are almost inevitably appropriate to those whose lives, upset by illness, need the maximum of divine help, support and guidance.

5. Laying on of Hands. This expresses the Touch of Christ, and the caring touch of the local Christian community. As with Anointing, it is usually the head rather than afflicted bodily areas on which hands are laid. The head expresses – as nothing else does – the person. The head would most naturally be used in time of commissioning for service, and the close link with this is important, since blessings of health that are given are best seen as equipment for witness and service.

6. Anointing. For how to administer this, see below. A prayer such as the following may be used – ‘(Name). **In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I anoint you with this holy oil, that you may receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit, for the healing of all your infirmities, whether of spirit, of mind, or of body. Amen.**’

7. Laying on of hands is resumed, with prayer. This may be informal, but the use of an existing prayer, such as the one below, is likely to express great and deeper things than most of us could say off-the-cuff. The sick need everything we can give.

‘As with this visible oil your body is outwardly anointed, so may our heavenly Father grant of his infinite goodness that your soul may inwardly be anointed with the Holy Spirit, and be filled with strength and comfort.

May the almighty God restore to you (bodily) health and strength to serve him.

May he send to you freedom from all your pains, troubles and diseases whether of body or mind.

May he pardon you all your sins and offences.

May he give you the strength to serve him truly.

By the working of God's outpoured Holy Spirit within you, may you have perfect victory, and triumph over Satan, sin, disease and death;

through Jesus Christ our Lord, who by his death has destroyed death, and now with the Father and the Holy Spirit ever lives and reigns, God, world without end. Amen.’

8. Quiet. A time for the reality of this to 'sink in' is important, and if not within the service, ought to be provided for afterwards. Often Christians rush away from important times of blessing when they need to give them time to 'take root'.

9. Thanksgiving.

10. Blessing of others present. The Blessing of the sick Christian has been given individually through the Laying on of Hands. Those ministering and attending have not been so blessed. If the numbers are few Blessing may be given individually rather than corporately, i.e. with the Laying on of Hands.

It needs saying that those closest to the sick can sometimes be in greater need than the patient. Times of ministry to the patient usually and naturally flow-over into the care and prayer of his/her friends and supporters.

9) The Oil

Pure olive oil is easy enough to obtain from a local store. It is better, however, to get it from the area Christian leader/Bishop.

In episcopal churches, the bishop at his consecration is commissioned to ‘heal the sick’. This ministry (for obvious practical purposes) is largely delegated to the local clergy. On Maundy Thursday the bishop traditionally blesses the oil for his clergy’s use.

If anointing is thought to be a fringe activity or suspect, the fact that the oil comes from the area leader makes it clear that the ministry is central to church life.

In addition, it is an encouragement to the sick in their loneliness to feel that they and their suffering are the concern of a wider church family.

10) The Anointing

In the past, sometimes the five senses have been symbolically anointed to seal them for God’s use. (This is sometimes appropriate for those previously involved in the occult.)

The Roman Church often anoints head and hands. Just as in confirmation the head symbolises the whole person, so traditionally the head has been anointed by the minister dipping his thumb in the oil making the sign of the cross on the forehead. The link with baptism is expressed in this.

The anointing of the hands rightly emphasises recovery and service.

[Probably the public's widest awareness of anointing comes from the televising of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. The theme of the book is God's grace, and its climax is the use of oil to anoint in preparation for a Christian death.]

Traditionally, the priest then removes the oil with cotton wool. I have always regarded this as pastoral, psychological, theological and sacramental nonsense! If it is a good symbol to apply it cannot also be a good symbol to remove!

If, as is normally the case, a small amount only is used, it can stay there, and the sick person is left with the awareness of what has been given.

11) The Prayers

James sees anointing in the context of prayer, and we do right to follow him. The anointing of the sick ought to have prayerful preparation. The wider congregation ought to be praying for such ministries that are undertaken, in part, on their behalf.

As with all healing ministrations, attention must be given to preparation and after care if the occasion is to rest on a sure foundation and its result properly integrated in the life of the sufferer and the local Christian family.

12) The Outcomes

Sometimes the results may be clear, instant and glorious – as in the case of my own mother who was a cripple and was instantly, and lastingly, healed forty years ago when anointed. Sometimes the results may not be readily apparent!

It is particularly important, therefore, to stress that when God is so specifically invited to help us, **he always responds.**

Those around the sufferer must be watchful to see what God's response has been. It is often in areas and at levels which we did not envisage.

The most tragic thing is so to centre on the hope of an instant physical healing that if it does not happen God is assumed to have done nothing, and his wise work missed.

If it seems clear what God did not do, then look to see what he did do and build your on-going care and prayer upon it. It may be in the area of relationships, or past hurts, or future fears, or priorities, or – as James mentions – in the areas of sin and forgiveness.

Part IV - Conclusion

Peter said to the lame man: 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk.'

[Acts 3:6]

Like Simon Peter, we must know and admit what we lack, but be generous with what we have! The Church has, on sure Biblical grounds, a ministry to anoint the sick. It must be their needs, not our inclinations, that govern our local church policy regarding its availability.

We – to whom so much has been given – are not, I believe, at liberty to withhold so rich a means of blessing, hope and healing.

This 9th. century prayer, included in the Book of Common Prayer, expresses clearly for our 21st. century Church much of the spiritual reality of which anointing with oil can be both God's symbol and his instrument.

**Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,
And lighten with celestial fire.
Thou the anointing Spirit art,
Who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.**

**Thy blessed unction from above
Is comfort, life, and fire of love.
Enable with perpetual light
The dullness of our blinded sight.**

**Anoint and cheer our soiled face
With the abundance of thy grace.
Keep far our foes, give peace at home:
Where thou art guide no ill can come.**

**Teach us to know the Father, Son,
And thee, of both, to be but One.
That through the ages all along
This may be our endless song:
Praise to thy eternal merit
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**