



COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF ‘HEALING EVERY DISEASE AND SICKNESS AMONG THE PEOPLE’ IN MATTHEW 4:23-24

Samuel Sunday Alamu

Abstract

It seems, no challenge or infectious disease like the coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, has ever faced the world before and the African continent is no exception. The virus has claimed many lives and rendered many more incapacitated, both through illness and restrictions attending lock-down. It has affected the economic, political, social and spiritual lives of human beings worldwide. As of today, there is no cure and no end to this ravaging pandemic, including in the western world. With lock-down widely imposed by governments, citizens do not always receive effective, adequate, or ongoing resources. This has hit the poorest hardest. This paper focuses on Africans and their rights to health and quality of life, in the context of Jesus preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease, sickness, severe pain, and paralysis among people. This paper attempts an examination of Matthew 4:23-24 using historical-critical analysis.

Introduction

⁴²³ Καὶ περιῆγεν ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Γαλιλαίᾳ διδάσκων ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶν καὶ κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας καὶ θεραπέων πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν ἐν τῷ λαῷ. ²⁴ Καὶ ἀπῆλθεν ἡ ἀκοὴ αὐτοῦ εἰς ὅλην τὴν Συρίαν· καὶ προσήνεγκαν αὐτῷ πάντας τοὺς κακῶς ἔχοντας ποικίλαις νόσοις καὶ βασάνοις συνεχόμενους [καὶ] δαιμονιζομένους καὶ σεληνιαζομένους καὶ παραλυτικούς, καὶ ἐθεράπευσεν αὐτούς.

⁴²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. ²⁴ News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them (Matthew 4:23-24, NIV translation).

The effect of COVID-19 draws attention in Africa to the important matter of sickness and healing. In terms of its extent, the nature of this pandemic is unprecedented. This is not localized, like most natural disasters, such as earthquakes or, volcano eruptions, or most wars. COVID-19 has quickly spread worldwide, striking down rich and poor, powerful and powerless, and posing multiple challenges for the World-Health-Organisation (WHO). Repercussions have seen educational, economic, commercial and political systems seriously compromised. Measures such as the imposition of quarantine, large-scale repatriations of citizens, and adaptations in workplaces and public places number among these. Regarding private spaces too, governments in multiple nations have adopted lockdown policies restricting people to their homes. Money and palliatives have also been distributed as means of interventions. Health systems are also being upgraded and better resourced to address the crisis. International borders have been closed in an effort to prevent the spread of the pandemic. However, all these efforts have not halted infections, which continues to increase daily. Even well-equipped health systems have not prevented deaths. Technology has offered some hope but technology and globalization have also exacerbated the spread, both of the disease and misinformation. The spread persists across racial, national, religious, ethnic, economic, and social boundaries, all over the African continent and the rest of the inhabited world. This paper argues for the need of the church to study the life and ministry of Jesus, as encapsulated in Matthew 4:23-24, to learn how he ministered to both the physical and the spiritual needs of the people who came to him.

COVID-19, is a new virus, identified as the cause of an outbreak of respiratory illness, first detected in Wuhan, China in December 2019. Its typical symptoms include a persistent cough, fever, shortness of breath, muscle aches, sore throat, sudden loss of taste or smell, diarrhea and headache among others. COVID-19 can be severe, and sometimes fatal. The virus is thought to spread mainly from person-to-person, or to be transmitted through contact with infected materials, such as respiratory droplets contaminating objects or surfaces. There is currently no vaccine to prevent Corona Virus. The WHO declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January, and a pandemic on 11 March 2020. As of 29 May 2020, more than 5.86 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported in more than 188 countries and territories, resulting in

more than 362,000 deaths; more than 2.46 million people have recovered (Williams 1997:342).

Origin of Sickness – African Cosmology and Bible Perspectives

Almost everyone at some stage struggles with the problem of sickness. There are probably very few people in the world who have not ever been sick at some time in their life (O'Donovan 2000:306). In traditional African cosmology, God is the ultimate source of both sickness and health, as expressed, for instance, in the Akan proverb *Onyame ma wo yarewa, oma wo ono aduru* literally 'if God gives an ailment, he also provides the cure' (Larbi 2006:447). Although sickness may come from God, it is more usually associated with evil powers, such as witchcraft, sorcery or the personal evil deeds of an individual. In such cases, the cure for infirmities may not be scientific but achievable through rituals and sacrifices to assuage or defeat the forces behind the ailment. Hence, the office of the traditional priest is associated with divination, diagnosis, healing and exorcism (Larbi 2006:447). According to the Bible, God created human beings from the dust of the earth and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life to become living souls (Genesis 2:7). Not only this, it is recorded that everything that God created was very good (Genesis 1:31; Psalms 18:30). This implies that at creation God gave to human-beings bodies in full working order. Wilbur O'Donovan (2000:306) explains this further:

Sickness was not part of the original creation. When God told Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he gave Adam this warning: in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die (Gen 2:17). Adam disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit. We learn from Romans 5:12 that sin and death entered the world as a result of this act of disobedience by Adam. Death and sickness are related processes.

Sickness can bring about death and healing can prolong life. Jewish teachers believed that suffering, including sickness, was sometimes due to sin: one could suffer for one's own or for one's parents' sins. Just as sickness might be a form of judgement or punishment from God for the violation of his laws (Exodus 15:26; Deut 28:22), so, conversely, good health could be the result of one's obedience to his laws (Exodus 15:26; Deut 28:1-4). However, there are times when it may be a wrong conclusion to associate a particular calamity with sin (John 9:1-3). Sometimes the reason for sickness is elusive or mysterious. Healing is also a common phenomenon in

the Bible. Apart from examples found in the Old Testament, such as those involving Miriam (Numbers 12:9-16), Jeroboam (1 Kings 13:4-6), The widow's son (1 Kings 17:17-24), The son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:1-37), Naaman (2 Kings 5:8-14), or Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:1-11), Jesus also performs a lot of healing acts during his ministry. For instance, he cures the blind (Mark 8:22-26; 10:46-52), person afflicted with skin disease (Luke 17:11-19), the disabled and the paralysed (Matthew 9:2-7; Mark 2:3-12; Luke 5:18-25). Generalizing, the healing ministry of Jesus was a manifestation of three fundamental purposes. These are:

1. It was a demonstration of God's compassion towards the sick and the oppressed
(Matthew 9:35-36; 14:14; 14:29-34; Mark 1:40-42; Luke 4:18-27).
2. It demonstrated his true messiahship
(Matthew 9:1-8; Mark 10:46-52).
3. It showed Jesus inaugurating a task that he wanted his disciples to continue after his departure
(Mark 16:9-20; John 20:21; cf. Acts 3:6-10, 12-16; 14:8-10).

The Historical Background of the Gospel According to Matthew

For a proper study of this text, Matthew 4:23-24, it is a good idea to examine the author, date, audience, and purpose of the book.

Authorship:

As one commentator states, "Modern scholars hesitate to ascribe [the Gospel's] present form to Matthew because of its heavy dependence on the non-apostolic Mark, which seems an improbable thing for a member of the 12 apostles to do" (Akintunde 2005:14). The best way to respond to Matthew's alleged dependence on Mark for a substantial part of his Gospel is that Matthew agreed with Mark and wanted to demonstrate that the apostolic testimony about Christ was not divided. Matthew is called by his other name, Levi, both in Mark 2:13-17 and Luke 5:27-32. "It was Papias, bishop of Hierapolis (CE:150) who first attested to Matthew as the author in his exposition of the Oracles of the Lord about A.D. 130" (Easton, online).

Date:

The date of Matthew is also debated. Although there is little in the book itself to indicate the time of its writing, it was written before the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24), and sometime after the events it records. The probability is that it was written between the years A.D. 60 and 65 (Barker & Kohlenberger 1994:3). The Gospel of Matthew is the most highly revered and frequently quoted canonical gospel during the first three centuries of the Church. The earliest possible date is much more difficult to nail down because it depends on so many other disputed points, such as whether Luke used Matthew, Matthew used Mark or Mark used Matthew” (Keener 1993:43-44). Some have argued based on its Jewish characteristics that the Gospel was written during the period of the early Church, possibly the early part of A.D. 50, when the Church was largely Jewish and the gospel was preached predominantly to Jews (Acts 11:19). However, those who maintain that Matthew and Luke used Mark date it later than A.D. 50. Craig Keener (1993:44) observes that,

Some conservative scholars, like Robert Gundry, date Matthew before AD 70 and some even later. They based their argument on the fact that Matthew addresses the emerging power of the Pharisaic rabbis considerably more than Mark. However, it is reasonable to summarise that Matthew was written in the seventies, although this date is not certain.

Genre:

The consensus view is that the Gospel of Mark was already in circulation by the time Matthew was written. Therefore, as to its genre, Matthew followed a source (Mark), which was regarded as highly reliable. This was in line with the standard literary practice of the day. Material distinctive to Matthew was inserted around material from this dependable source (Keener 1993:44). Matthew is in part biography but this genre followed distinct conventions from those practiced nowadays (Boer 1982:15).

Audience:

The audience of this Gospel was mainly Jewish. This is evident from Matthew’s strong interest in messianic fulfilment of the Old Testament (Johnson 1993:273). A book’s purpose is to a large extent determined by its audience and, it is clear that Matthew’s Gospel is aimed at a primarily Jewish audience. Hence, the Gospel serves as a link between the Old Testament

and the New Testament; it traces Jesus' descent from the patriarch Abraham (Matthew 1:1-17); it does not explain Jewish customs (unlike Mark). It uses Jewish terminology like 'Kingdom of Heaven' and 'Father of Heaven'. At the same time, the writer also hoped for a gentile audience, discernible in occasional references to gentiles as also forming part of God's Kingdom.

Purpose:

The main purpose of Matthew's Gospel is to demonstrate that Jesus was the fulfilment of messianic prophecy. This is achieved by showing a Jewish audience how Jesus in his life and ministry fulfilled Old Testament Scripture.

Literary Analysis of Matthew 4:23-24

Matthew 4:23-24 falls into the context of the ministry of Jesus in Galilee (Matthew 4:12-25). Jesus began his ministry in Galilee. He started when he heard that John had been put in prison (4:12). His dwelling place was in Capernaum, which is probably the modern Tell Hum (Barbieri 1989:28). Matthew describes the place as in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali associated with the prophecy of Isaiah the prophet (4:13-16). The emphasis of Jesus' sermon was on repentance (v. 17). In the course of his ministry, Jesus came across Peter and Andrew and asked them to follow him. The two became his first disciples (4:18-20). As he walked a little further, he met two other brothers, James and John the sons of Zebedee. These two also left their father and their business to follow Jesus (vv. 21-22). Moving away from the street, Jesus went into the Jewish synagogues teaching and preaching about the Kingdom. As they saw him doing this and healing, people all over Syria brought to him all those that were ill with various health-related problems and Jesus healed them (vv. 23-25). There is no mention of the reason for, or cause of the illness, diseases and impairments. Jesus is simply described as healing all, seemingly unconditionally.

Thematic Structure of Matthew 4:12-25

The immediate context of Matthew 4:23-24 can be summarized as follows:

- 4:12-17 The Sermon of Jesus
- 4:18-22 The Call of the First Disciples
- 4:23-25 Jesus Heals the Sick

The structure can be interpreted as relational and sequential. It begins with the sermons of Jesus to his Galilean audience which centre on repentance for the sake of the kingdom being at hand. This is followed by the call of his first disciples who would take over from him after he has departed. Finally, the sequence closes with Jesus healing people with a range of health challenges. This demonstrates Jesus' power and identity as Messiah and inaugurates the kingdom he is proclaiming.

Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 4:23-24

Matthew 4:23-24 falls within the three-fold ministry of Jesus, comprising preaching, teaching, and healing. Mat 4:23 is an important summary statement crucial to Matthew's theme (Goodrick & Kohlenberger 1990:1541). The ministry of Jesus is not limited to teaching and preaching. It also involves healing and deliverance of those who are sick, as well as, pastoral care and counselling for troubled souls. This fulfils the notion of holistic ministry, that is, a ministry that soothes the human's spirit, body, and soul. The people also brought their relations that were sick with different kinds of sicknesses and diseases. The news about Jesus had clearly spread throughout Syria and large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the wide region across the Jordan followed him. The Gospel of Matthew uses the Greek word *καί* (*kai*, 'and') four times in 4:23 and seven times in verse 24. The recurrence of this word indicates its significance in the text under study. Most often *καί* is used as a conjunctive particle.

In Matthew 4:23-24, it conveys a relationship between a preceding word or verse and a successive word or verse. For instance, the first occurrence of *καί* in Matthew 4:23 shows that verse 23 is a continuation of what began in verses 12 through to 22. The Greek word, though not translated in the NIV, explicitly links verses 22 and 23. In the same way, the second and the third occurrences of *καί* link together the words *διδάσκων* (*didáskōn*,

‘teaching’), κηρύσσω (*kerússōn* ‘preaching’) and θεραπεύων (*therapeúōn*, ‘healing’) indicating that they are collectively important parts of the ministry of Jesus. The last occurrence shows a continuation between πᾶσαν νόσον (*pāsan nōson* ‘every disease’), and ‘πᾶσαν μαλακίαν (*pāsan malakían*, ‘every illness’). This also indicates that there is a link between ‘every disease’ and ‘every illness’ in this context. The words and works of Jesus in Matthew 4:23-24, therefore, form part of his three-fold-ministry in the region of Galilee. Consequently, the large crowd from the region and beyond became his followers having seen and received healing from him. What does the word “healing” used here imply? What does it mean to heal? What does “every disease” and “every sickness” mean here? A further analysis of the words healing, disease and sickness will help in understanding the phrase “and he healed them”.

Philological Study

For a clearer understanding, there are some key words that demand careful study: teaching (διδάσκων), preaching (κηρύσσω), the gospel (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, *to euangélion*), healing (θεραπεύων), every disease (πᾶσαν νόσον) and every illness (πᾶσαν μαλακίαν).

διδάσκων

The Greek διδάσκων is translated “teaching” and comes from the verb διδάσκω which means “I teach”. Διδάσκων can be either a present active participle nominative singular masculine or a present active participle vocative singular masculine. In this text, it is the former, the nominative. Διδάσκω (*didáskō*) is the root and it means ‘to teach’, ‘to instruct’, ‘to provide information in a manner intended to produce understanding, either in a formal or informal setting’ (Vine, Unger and White 1996:619). It is used here in the sense of, ‘to give instruction’. It can also be used transitively with an object, whether about persons, (e.g. Matthew 5:2; 7:29 and frequently in the Gospels and Acts), or things ‘taught’ (as in Matthew 15:9; 22:16; Acts 15:35; 18:11), or to both persons and things (e.g. John 14:26; Rev. 2:14,20) (Barker & Kohlenberger 1994:21). The teaching of Jesus is illustrated by Matthew in five major sections in the Gospel on various topics such as discipleship (chapters 5-7), mission (chapter 10), parables (chapter 13), community relationship (chapter 18) and the end of the age (chapters 24-25). “The ministry of Jesus included teaching, preaching and

healing. Galilee, the district covered, is small (approximately seventy by forty miles), but it had a population of up to three million and over two hundred cities and villages. Jesus “went around doing good (Acts 10:38)” (Mounce 1993:281). In this context, Jesus is instructing or providing information to the people who come to him. He does this in an informal setting and in a manner that is intended to bring about understanding. Seemingly, instruction is an important prerequisite and preparation for the kingdom.

κηρύσσω

The Greek word κηρύσσω is translated “preaching”. It is from the primary root κηρύσσω, which means ‘to publish’, ‘to proclaim as a herald’ or ‘to announce openly and publicly’, as in Mark 1:4 and Luke 4:18 (Wiersbe 1989). While κηρύσσω is the present indicative active of the first person singular, the word κηρύσσων appears in the text under consideration as a present participle active nominative singular masculine. The word κηρύσσων connotes the activities of Jesus, which he was performing during the week outside the synagogues. Miracles of healing were one part of Christ's ministry throughout Galilee; but He also taught and preached the Word. The word “preach,” in this text (Matt 4:23), means “to announce as a herald.” Jesus proclaimed with authority the Good News that the kingdom of heaven was at hand (Bock 2002:49). Jesus was proclaiming the good news (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον). Thus, apart from teaching, preaching is another essential ministry of Jesus. The word “preach” has been used in a great number of ways in the Gospels. A careful study of the word follows.

θεραπεύων

This is a present active participle nominative singular masculine. The Greek word θεραπεύων is from θεραπεύω, which primarily signifies the service of an attendant to a sick person. It also has the idea of caring for the sick, treating, curing and healing. The word has been used a great number of times in Matthew and Luke, but just once in John (5:10). It may also denote caring, giving attention to something or somebody (Luke 12:42), or rendering medical service (Luke 9:11; Rev 22:2) (Mounce 1993:244). In the words of Williams D. Mounce (1993:244), θεραπεύω could also mean rendering divine service or worship (Acts 17:25). It is the act of giving help or taking care of another, and by extension, to heal or

cure (Barker & Kohlenberger 1994:22). In this text, Jesus, in the course of his ministry in the region of Galilee, heals various types of sickness. Although details of these sicknesses are not given in the text, sickness in the New Testament may result directly from a particular sin (e.g. John 5:14; 1 Corinthians 11:30) or it may not (e.g. John 9:2-3). But both Scripture and Jewish tradition take sickness as resulting from living in a fallen world (Bock 2002:50). Therefore, the healing ministry of Jesus is a proclamation of the Kingdom of God, which he heralds by dealing with sin and infirmities. Healing foreshadows life under God's rule when death, the consequence of sin, will be banished (cf. Rev 20:14) (Larbi 2006:447). Healing is the manifestation of God's goodness and compassion in response to human shortcomings and suffering (Exodus 15:26) (Vine, Unger & White 1996:275).

τὸ εὐαγγέλιον

The word εὐαγγέλιον – in pagan contexts often used in reference to good news from or about the emperor – translates in English as “good news”. It originally denoted a reward for good tidings. Later, the idea of reward dropped, and the word stood for “the good news” itself (Mounce 1993:222). It can be referred to as glad tidings or joyful news. (cf. Matthew 9:35). The word can be either nominative singular neuter or accusative singular neuter. However, in this context, εὐαγγέλιον is used as accusative singular neuter. Therefore, in Matthew 4:23, Jesus is proclaiming “good tidings” of the kingdom that will liberate us from the bondage of sin. The Greek verb εὐαγγελίζω (*euangelizō*) – not used in this text – means ‘I preach/bring good news’. This word is almost always used with “the good news” concerning the son of God as proclaimed in the Gospel. With reference to the Gospel, the phrase “to bring, to declare, good, or glad tidings” is used in Acts 13:32, Romans 10:15, and Hebrews 4:2. In the Septuagint (the early Greek translation of the Old Testament and Apocrypha), the verb is used as any message intended to cheer the hearers (e.g. 1 Sam 3:19; 2 Sam 1:20). Preaching tends to describe a public proclamation concerning what God is doing and what people should do by way of response (as in Matthew 4:23, “repent, for the Kingdom of God is nearer”). The good news that is being preached is the gospel of the kingdom. It means that God is at work fulfilling his promise about a Messiah to liberate people from some type of tyranny and bring them under his rule (Vine, Unger & White 1996:295).

νόσον

The word translates in English as “disease”. It is the accusative singular feminine of the word ‘νόσος’. As one of the several words for “disease” in verses 23 and 24, ‘νόσος’ can be translated as sickness or distemper (cf. Matthew 4:24; 8:17; 9:35). It is the singular word for “disease” and “sickness” in Matthew 4:23, 8:17, 9:35 and 10:1 (RV, KJV, cf. Matthew 4:24; Mark 1:34; Luke 4:40; 6:17; Acts 19:12). However, in Luke 7:21, the KJV has “infirmities”. Some manuscripts (in terms of textual criticism criteria) omit the word in Mark 3:15 (see Mounce 1993:307). Although the precise natures of these diseases (and illnesses, sicknesses and infirmities) is not known, these may refer to weakness of the body, unwellness, seizure, pains and physical deformities or inabilities, as well as, mental or emotional conditions. But regardless of their nature, Jesus cures them all. None are too much for his healing powers. It is interesting that there is no record in Matthew 4:23-24 that anybody went back home with his or her own sickness not cured.

μαλακίαν

This word primarily denotes “softness” (Matthew 11:8), “debility” or “disease” and in the New Testament is found only in the Gospel of Matthew (4:23; 9:35; 10:1). It is, however, in the Septuagint (Genesis 42:4; 44:29; Deuteronomy 7:15; 28:61; Isaiah 38:9; 53:3). Μαλακίαν is an accusative singular feminine of ‘μαλακία’ *malakia*, which means softness of disposition, weakness, infirmity of the body (cf. 9:35; 10:1). It is described as an ailment (Barker & Kohlenberger 1994:21). From the analysis done so far, it is safe to conclude that the English words “disease” and “sickness”, adopted in the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible are inclusive and refer to a wide range of health-related problems. Today, this might, therefore, include such conditions that are now diagnosed and called by such names as Coronavirus, Lassa Fever, Ebola, HIV/AIDS among others. The context, however, suggests severe pain or incapacity, as well as demon-possession, paralysis and seizures.

Theological Analysis

Matthew 4:23-24 relates to Jesus’ three-fold-ministry: teaching, preaching and healing. As an itinerant teacher and preacher, Jesus was going around doing good (Acts 10:38) and proclaiming the Kingdom whose nearness

had already been announced (3:2; 4:17) and which is the central subject of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 (Keener 1993:55). The healings of different diseases and sicknesses among the people further support the Kingdom's presence and approach (cf. 11:2-6; Isaiah 35:5-6). Jesus, it is clear, has a personal concern for people's health. His ministry is not complete unless it meets both the spiritual and physical needs of humans. For me, this text speaks to the physical and the spiritual well-being of every human being – not only of Jesus' time but also up to the present. It is necessary to say that this verse (Matthew 4:23) exemplifies Jesus' life as an itinerant gospel minister. During his earthly ministry, He travelled throughout the region ministering to the needs of the people. Three important elements are further expanded:

First, Jesus went throughout Galilee ministering in the synagogues. He ministered through teaching to his Jewish audiences. Visiting teachers, especially popular ones, were normally invited to speak in synagogues, which in this period were led by priests or laymen who were prominent members of their communities (Barbieri 2000:28). In Matthew 4:23, the mention of Jesus teaching in the synagogue is especially worthy of note. His teachings, both in private and in public, indicate that he was a respected person in the synagogue. His teaching is considered remarkable. For instance, as he taught, he used everyday life situations to tell people about the Kingdom of God, and about how to treat one another. He simplified and made accessible the big theological ideas of God, which then made it easy to apply to the lives of his audience.

Second, Jesus ministered through preaching. He was involved in a prophetic ministry for he is "the prophet" announced in Deuteronomy 18:15-19 (Chianeque & Ngewa 2006:234). In the New Testament, this announcement is interpreted as referring to Jesus. This is why John the Baptist denies being "the prophet" (John 1:21) (Barbieri 2000:28). His preaching centered on "the kingdom". God was coming to fulfil his covenant with Israel and to establish his kingdom on the earth. This must also be the message of the churches in Africa. Jesus preached about God and his love for humanity. By this act, he has set an example for the church to follow. He preached and charged Christians to love one another as God loves. It was his preaching that intrigued people. It was his message to his audience to live according to God's will and to live justly and with compassion for others that compelled people of Jesus' original audiences. Therefore, the church today must also do same to attract people to God.

Third, Jesus' healing ministry is an integral part of his work among the people to whom he ministered. Jesus' ministry was characterized by his willingness to heal. He was moved by compassion for the weak. He healed every disease and sickness among the people. For example, in Matthew 9:35, Jesus was going about cities and villages in Israel teaching people and preaching to them. His messages were backed up by miraculous signs of healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness, which served to authenticate that he is indeed the prophet (Larbi 2006:447). Jesus healed so that people could live and be fully part of society. As he went about healing people of their diseases, and news about him and his miracles began to travel quickly throughout the region of Galilee. Therefore, in the same way, the church needs to be compassionately working to improve the condition of the people and the wide society. The church must emulate the example of Jesus by teaching and preaching true and undiluted sermons to the congregation and the general public, bearing in mind that Jesus did not lay undue emphasis on "miracles" but on "the Kingdom". The message must be capable of liberating both the soul and the body. Furthermore, this must not be for money-making as is the practice in some churches today. Many people today in Africa are going through hard times. Apart from economic hardship and security challenges ravaging the entire continent, there is now also the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic that has taken over the entire globe. People who are ill with various diseases, those suffering from pain, and other infirmities including COVID-19 should be encouraged to invite Jesus into their situations so he may heal them.

Conclusion

The text of Matthew 4:23-24 occurs within the larger context of the early ministry of Jesus. The chapter begins with the temptation of Jesus and ends with his teaching, preaching and healing of the people. Historically, Matthew the Levite, who also wrote this gospel, addressed an audience that consisted mostly of Jewish persons, although he also hoped for gentile audiences and he occasionally referred to them. The Gospel, probably before the destruction of Jerusalem (in A.D. 70), was written to demonstrate that Jesus was the fulfilment of messianic prophecy. An exegetical analysis of the passage and keywords of the text led to the insight that

νόσον (*nóson*) and μαλακίαν (*malakían*) encompass those problems relating to human's health which echo the travails of modern-day health challenges. Although the natures of the ailments referred to in the text are not specified, the fact remains that there are several of people who are physically sick in society. At the time of Jesus and the early apostle, severe pains, demon-possession, seizures, and paralysis, were some of the commonest ailments in Palestine. The phrase "healing every sickness and every disease" does not mean that all that was sick at that time were all healed without a single one left, however, a number of them had their health restored. Therefore, it will be wrong to assume that everyone who is infected with COVID-19 or with any other health-related issues will be healed by the preachers today, who are not Jesus.

It has been observed that traditional understandings of the cause of disease have survived in African Christianity, as is clear from the popularity of prophets and faith healers. However, the church must teach and preach the message of the Bible and guide members in order not to be misled as they try to attend healing services or consult spiritualists for solutions to their problems. Furthermore, the church in Africa must realize that the power to heal lies in the hands of God. He possesses absolute power to either heal or not. He also decides whom to heal and whom not to heal. After all, not all those that were sick in Jesus' days were healed. Many died in their afflictions. Not all those that were oppressed were delivered. John the Baptist was beheaded while in prison. Not all the dead were raised to life like Lazarus. It can be concluded that Jesus may choose to heal a patient from COVID-19, or he may choose otherwise. Whichever way, this does not change his nature. Therefore, considering the nature of COVID-19, everyone must take responsibility and the infected people or their relations, while seeking medical care, should invite Jesus into their situation, as a matter of importance, to come and save their lives, just like the centurion did on behalf of his slave that was sick and about to die (Luke 7:1-3). This is because it would be suicidal to carry an infected person into the church or any other place where there is a crowd.

References

- Akintunde, Dorcas Olu (2005), *The Four Gospels and Acts*, Ibadan: Lerak Ventures.
- Barker Kenneth L. & John R. Kohlenberger (1994), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, New Testament*, Abridged edition, Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Boer, Harry R. (1982), *The Four Gospels and Acts. A short Introduction*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

- Barbieri, Louis A. (1989), 'Matthew,' in John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck (eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, Colorado Springs: David Cook.
- Bock Darrell L. (ed.) (2002), *The Bible Knowledge Key Word Study: The Gospels*, Colorado: Victor.
- Chianeque Luciano C. & Samuel Ngewa (2006), 'Deuteronomy,' in Tokunboh Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary*, Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers.
- 'Coronavirus (COVID-19),' Available online: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>. (Accessed 29 May 2020).
- Easton, Matthew George (n.d.), *Easton Bible Dictionary*, Online edition. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publisher. (Accessed 24 May, 2020).
- Goodrick Edward W. & John R. Kohlenberger (1990), *The NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Holcombe, Madeline (29 May 2020), 'With the coronavirus pandemic entering a new phase in the US, world health experts shift focus to new hot spots,' Available online: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/29/health/us-coronavirus-friday/index.html>. (Accessed 29 May 2020).
- Johnson, Sherman E. (1993), 'The Gospel of St. Matthew,' in George A. Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VII. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Keener, Craig S. (1993), *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Illinois: InterVarsity Press.
- Larbi, E. Kingsley (2006), '2 Kings,' in Tokunboh Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary*, Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers.
- Mounce, William D. (1993), *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- O' Donovan, Wilbur (2000), *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*, Carlisle: The Paternoster Press.
- Vine, W.E., Merrill F. Unger & William White (1996), *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- 'What is Coronavirus,' Available online: <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus>. (Accessed 29 May 2020).
- Wiersbe, Warren W. (1989), *The Bible Exposition Commentary, New Testament*, Colorado: Chariot Victor Publishing, PC Study Bible 5.
- Williams, Derek (1997), *New Concise Bible Dictionary*, Leicester: InterVarsity Press.