

Liturgy of the Word 5th Sun. Ordinary time
5th Feb 2012

First Reading Jb 7:1-4. 6-7 A reading from the book of Job

I am filled with sorrow all day long. Job began to speak: Is not man's life on earth nothing more than pressed service, his time no better than hired drudgery? Like the slave, sighing for the shade, or the workman with no thought but his wages, months of delusion I have assigned to me, nothing for my own but nights of grief. Lying in bed I wonder, 'When will it be day?' Risen I think, 'How slowly evening comes!' Restlessly I fret till twilight falls. Swifter than a weaver's shuttle my days have passed, and vanished, leaving no hope behind. Remember that my life is but a breath, and that my eyes will never again see joy.

The word of the Lord.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 146:1-6. R. v.3

(R.) Praise the Lord who heals the broken-hearted.

1. Praise the Lord for he is good; sing to our God for he is loving: to him our praise is due. *(R.)*
2. The Lord builds up Jerusalem and brings back Israel's exiles, he heals the broken-hearted, he binds up all their wounds. He fixes the number of the stars; he calls each one by its name. *(R.)*
3. Our Lord is great and almighty; his wisdom can never be measured. The Lord raises the lowly; he humbles the wicked to the dust. *(R.)*

Second Reading 1 Cor 9:16-19. 22-23 A reading from the first letter of St Paul to the Corinthians

Punishment will come to me if I do not preach the Gospel.

I do not boast of preaching the gospel, since it is a duty which has been laid on me; I should be punished if I did not preach it! If I had chosen this work myself, I might have been paid for it, but as I have not, it is a responsibility which has been put into my hands. Do you know what my reward is? It is this: in my preaching, to be able to offer the Good News free, and not insist on the rights which the gospel gives me.

So though I am not a slave of any man I have made myself the slave of everyone so as to win as many as I could. For the weak I made myself weak. I made myself all things to all men in order to save some at any cost; and I still do this, for the sake of the gospel, to have a share in its blessings.

The word of the Lord.

Gospel Acclamation Mt 8:17

Alleluia, alleluia! He bore our sickness, and endured our suffering Alleluia!

Gospel Mk 1:29-39 A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark

He cured many who suffered from diseases of one kind or another.

On leaving the synagogue, Jesus went with James and John straight to the house of Simon and Andrew. Now Simon's mother-in-law had gone to bed with fever, and they told him about her straightaway. He went to her, took her by the hand and helped her up. And the fever left her and she began to wait on them.

That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many devils, but he would not allow them to speak, because they knew who he was.

In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, 'Everybody is looking for you.' He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can preach there too, because that is why I came.' And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out devils.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Scripture Commentary by Brendan Byrne SJ

Last Sunday we heard Mark's description of the first public act of Jesus teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, in the course of which he dramatically frees a man possessed by an evil spirit (Mark 1:21-28). It is the first blow Jesus strikes against the rule of Satan in the world.

The Gospel for today, Mark 1:29-39, describes the continuation of that inaugural day, first with the cure of Simon's mother-in-law (vv 29-31) and then with the extension of his healing and liberating activity to a wider group of people (vv 32-34), before the re-launching of his mission on a Galilee-wide scale (vv 35-39). The overall effect is to portray Jesus powerfully and successfully beginning to confront the afflicted situation of humankind.

The extract from the Book of Job, 7:1-4, 6-7, which forms the first reading, seems to have been chosen because it dramatises the limitations of the human lot with such poignancy as to provide a very effective background to the situation addressed by Jesus in the Gospel.

We should note, however, how the healing ministry of Jesus actually begins on a rather modest, even domestic scale. Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever, a more threatening condition in those days but not necessarily something out of the ordinary. Simon (Peter) is the leading disciple of the four that Jesus has just called to leave off being fishers of fish and become 'fishers of people' (1:16-20). Responding to his call has meant leaving both livelihood and family behind. The fact that Jesus performs this healing for Simon's family shows that having their menfolk follow Jesus is not entirely loss. They are going to gain something as well – to be drawn into the sphere of new life and healing associated with the new 'family of God', the band of disciples Jesus will gather around himself. The terms in which the healing action of Jesus is described, 'He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up' echoes the language of resurrection. The 'service' that the recovered woman then provides for Jesus and his disciples seems to foreshadow the 'service' (*diakonia*) that Jesus himself will provide as the Son of Man who has come 'not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many' (10:45). Thus this healed woman, at the very start of Jesus' ministry, seems to anticipate the loving service of the unnamed woman who, just before Jesus' passion, will lovingly and appropriately anoint him for burial (14:3-9). She begins a pattern to be played out in this gospel where women by and large grasp the true meaning of Jesus' mission, especially its entrance into suffering, and the male disciples, including Simon Peter, do not.

The description of Jesus' more general healing activity later that evening raises for homilists the problem of how to explain this kind of activity to hearers of the gospel today. Undoubtedly, we find in the Gospels

generally, and in Mark in particular, the attribution to demonic possession of many conditions that modern medicine would prefer to ascribe to various kinds of psycho-physical conditions. There is no good reason to suppose that the Galilean towns and villages where Jesus laboured were any more prone to cases of true demonic possession than is the case today. The gospel highlights the demonic, not only because its author attributed many more conditions to that cause than we would, but also out of the desire to portray all Jesus' activity – whether teaching, healing or exorcising – as a life-and-death struggle with the powers opposed to God for the freedom and enhancement of human life.

The Gospel stresses the eagerness of the crowd to access the power of Jesus, both on this evening and then after his brief moment of retirement to a lonely place to pray. It dramatises in this way the desperation of the human condition and the sense that Jesus and he alone can provide the liberation they so deeply desire. So, from the family of Simon and the afflicted people of Capernaum, Jesus moves on 'to the neighbouring towns' too because as he says, 'It is for this that I came out' – came out from Nazareth but 'came out' more radically as the Son of God to confront and overcome the evil of the world.

The second reading, 1 Cor 9:16-19, 22-23, shows the radical commitment of Paul to the same gospel of liberation. © Brendan Byrne SJ

Scripture Commentary by Dianne Bergant CSA

Crushed by the torment of his own situation, Job bemoans the harshness of life itself. It is like hard military service, which makes terrible demands on an individual and jeopardises one's very life. It is also like the quandary of a hireling, who is always beholden to another. Finally, it is likened to the predicament of a slave who has nothing to say about anything and is totally dependent upon the slaveholder. Job is also troubled by the transitoriness and ephemeral nature of life. The whole tenor of his complaint suggests that Job believes that he is being treated in a way that ill befits him. Still his complaint is an act of confidence that God will intervene.

The psalm calls for praise of the Lord, because of God's goodness. God gathers the dispersed people and rebuilds Jerusalem. God also comforts them in their suffering, caring for them with tenderness. And God shows this goodness to sinful people. Many people believe that their destiny is determined by the positions of the heavenly bodies. By stating that God is the one who numbers the stars and names them, the psalmist is making a claim of God's creative power over these heavenly bodies. God's power, wisdom and justice are praised. This is evident in God's justice as meted out to the guilty and in God's tender care given to those who suffer.

Paul was not called to preach because of his righteousness or his great proficiency in forms of rhetoric. He was called because God so ordained it. It's clear that Paul's vocation was determined by God, for he had been summoned while he was persecuting the infant Church. The issue was not if Paul preached, but *how* he preached. He did so with enthusiasm because it was his destiny; it would be woe to him if he did not preach. He was entrusted with the responsibility of stewardship over the most precious treasures of God's household, the people for whom God's word was intended. He preached at no cost, for then he was beholden to no one and was able to preach the Gospel without being concerned about offending his audience.

In curing Simon's ailing mother-in-law, Jesus exempts himself from certain Sabbath regulations. While the story suggests that 'waited on them' (*diakonéo*) signifies traditional woman's domestic work, it usually connotes ministry or service within the community. Jesus realises that the crowds follow him because they want miracles, while he wants them to hear his gospel. These two works are actually very closely connected. The exorcisms were really confrontations between the power of God in Jesus and the power of evil, and they acted as external proof of the authority of Jesus and of the trustworthiness of the gospel he preached.

Therefore, it is appropriate to condense the works of Jesus as healings and preaching. © Dianne Bergant CSA

Homily by Richard Leonard SJ

In the time of Jesus almost everything they couldn't understand was put down to a demon or an evil spirit. In the Talmud, (a large book dating from around the time of Jesus that contains the collected teachings of the Rabbis), several pages are devoted to the healing of 'fevers'. Even though we have become more advanced in our medical knowledge, it's surprising how this thinking still persists. While most people don't blame evil for their ailments, they can think God has a direct hand in sending an illness or an injury. Such faulty theology cannot be reconciled with the New Testament.

There is not a single instance where Jesus inflicts pain and suffering on others. He regularly tells us we have to carry our cross and bear our burdens, but this is vastly different from personally laying a cross on our shoulders or giving us the burdens in the first place. By contrast, every time that Jesus encounters suffering and pain he works to heal it and restore the person to new life.

The differences between the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and the other healing stories in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel are striking. Rather than in a public space and in front of crowds this personal healing occurs in the privacy of Peter's house. By contrast to the command for the demons to be gone, in his bedside ministry Jesus never mentions a demon and uses no words. Instead he gently takes her by the hand and helps her to her feet. Unlike the others Jesus heals, of whom we never hear about their response, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law leads her to an act of service. Given all the details Mark give us of this encounter it's a pity he never tells us her name.

Sometimes we can think of Jesus' miracles, then and now, as acts of dazzling power. The problem with this idea is that if we see Jesus as going around 'zapping' people it's hard to figure out why there were times when he could not perform any miracles at all, or that they happened in stages. Whatever else miracles are, they are deeply personal encounters of faith.

As Catholics we believe in the power of miracles and that the source of them is always the grace of God. But we do not have to see them as something done to us from without. Rather, we can see them as unlocking something from within. For some people Jesus' word or touch set free the healing power God had placed in them. For others it came through another person's intercession. The same holds true for us today.

Furthermore, being anointed, celebrating Reconciliation or Eucharist, going to a place of pilgrimage, fasting, being prayed over or meditating can have a similar effect. Looked at in this way we can see why some people are healed and others are not. If a personal encounter with Jesus did not always lead to healing, then why should it surprise us that some other encounters these days do not always unlock God's healing within us.

Small and large-scale miracles are happening everyday. Today's Gospel reminds us that they do not happen for show or for the sake of the crowd. They are realisations of faith. Taking Peter's mother-in-law as our model we are healed and strengthened so that we can witness to God's saving power, serve the Kingdom of God in any way we can, and continue to wait on the Lord. © Richard Leonard SJ

Reflection by Dianne Bergant CSA

Today we see three snapshots from the photo album of life.

Suffering comes to everyone. It can take such a hold of us that the happiness of the past is swallowed up, the beauty of better days is forgotten, and the hope of a brighter future is imperilled. Life ceases to be an adventure and takes on the guise of drudgery. At such times suffering appears to be our permanent fate, and life seems too short for suffering to run its course. If we become identified with our distress, we will be tormented.

Jesus knew the harshness of life, because he was one of us. He saw it in the lives of those he loved, and he was touched by their torment. He came to release people from the demons that possess them, from the illness that undermined their lives. He came to bring the reign of God, the reign of peace and fulfilment. He came to heal the brokenhearted, to bind up their wounds.

Paul was a messenger of this gospel of salvation and fulfilment. He was so committed to his mission that he empathised with all those who heard his preaching – the slaves, the weak, the brokenhearted, all those who knew well the harshness of life. Now it is our turn. We are the disciples who must bring the good news to the brokenhearted, to those who are enslaved, to those who are weak. We are the ones who will then share in the blessings of this good news.

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