

5th Sunday OT (B) — 4th February 2018 ‘Suffering and healing’

Job 7: delusion and drudgery of life.

1Cor 9: duty to preach the Gospel.

Mk 1: 29–39: He cured many.

When I was ordained a priest, back in 1999, in St Albans, I was very touched that an elderly priest came all the way from Cork to be there: he was the priest who had married my parents in the same church in 1965. It was a great honour to have him there; at the time, he had retired out of parish ministry, and was working full-time as a hospital chaplain in Cork. And I remember him saying to me that being a hospital chaplain full-time was one of the most pastoral roles he had ever undertaken: one could devote oneself to the pastoral and spiritual care of the sick and dying, and not be concerned with too much admin., or buildings, or finance ... simply with the care of suffering souls, bringing them the love & compassion of Christ. I will never forget his enthusiasm for that ministry, and it served me well when, for the 5.5 yrs prior to my coming here I too was a full-time hospital chaplain.

The book of Job, from which we had a short passage in the first reading, is one of the most fascinating in the Old

Testament, perhaps because it addresses the age-old problem of suffering. Job is a good, God-loving man, and yet suddenly he suffers a dreadful turn-around in his fortunes: he loses his livelihood: cattle, donkeys and camels; then he loses his children; then he loses his health! Job will not curse God for these events, but he does fall very low, bemoaning the miseries of this life. When we suffer we tend to say “Why me? What have I done wrong? I never thought that this would happen to me!” Some suffering, of course, does come about as a consequence of sins, whether by others or by ourselves, but disease and illness are mostly quite innocent; they’re not some sort of punishment for wrongdoing, and that can seem ‘unfair.’ But why do we think that? Why do we think we are immune from suffering? Job wasn’t. Jesus wasn’t. Mary wasn’t. St Paul wasn’t. In fact, few of the most holy people haven’t suffered.

C.S. Lewis once described “suffering as ‘God’s megaphone’ to arouse a deaf world that has forgotten Him.” When we suffer, we seem automatically to turn to God,

even if it's just to ask the question, "Why me, Lord?" Despite all our progress, illness and death is still inevitable; we are God's creation, loved by Him but in entire need of Him. To be immune from every distress and affliction would mean we were perfect beings with no need of God, but we're not! Even Christ suffered, and He is Son of God.

The answer to suffering is healing, although that won't always mean physical healing and our earthly life extended. (i) A large part of healing is prayer. To turn to God in prayer in difficulty is natural and human and right. Of course, that's easier if we're already in the habit of prayer, and attuned to Him, when we are well. It should be a daily part of our life to pray for those who are suffering. Long before dawn Jesus is praying to His Father. (ii) Another important part of healing is in visiting the sick. There are countless passages in the Gospel like tonight's in which Jesus tends the sick, and it's part of our Christian duty. Even if you can't bear the inside of a hospital, it's worth overcoming that fear! Sometimes I hear the comment, "I'd rather remember him/her as (s)he used to be, and not ill like this." This is very sad, and contributes to our attempt to insulate ourselves from suffering. A sick person can't be helped because

you don't like them being ill: they are still the same person, and still in need of your affection. (iii) A third part of healing comes in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick ≠ only 'extreme unction' or 'last rites' but a sacrament that can be received by all who are gravely ill, and is rightly to be received by the conscious. Asking for the priest to visit shouldn't be seen as the equivalent of danger of death being imminent. "I don't think I'm so bad that I need you yet, Father." Of course, a person close to death should be anointed, but there's no need to 'put off and put it off' until the dying hours. A conscious person is able to be comforted better by the priest, to be reconciled with God through confession, and to be helped to peace with the Sacrament of the Sick.

Final healing does not come in this life — but we can be more at peace if we do two things: (i) to pray fervently for God's help in suffering, that we may experience His power working in us, whether or not He heals us physically, and be witnesses of faith to our family and friends; (ii) to accept what we can't understand as having meaning in God's plan. We might not explain it in this life, but that's OK — we're human, but God is God. And God has it all in hand.