

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday (C)

13<sup>th</sup> February 2022

'Blessed are the Sick'

Jer 17: *the man who puts his trust in man ... the man who puts his trust in the Lord*

Ps 1: *Happy the man who has placed his trust in the Lord*

1Cor 15: *Christ has in fact been raised from the dead*

Lk 6: 17, 20–26: *Blessed are you who weep now ...*

Some years ago, a friend of mine who is a Dr specializing in palliative care gave me a book with the daunting title, *On Death & Dying*. It's quite a classic, written by a Swiss-born American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who wanted to see what patients could teach her about the social needs of those with terminal illness. In her ground-breaking book, written in 1969, one of the first things she says is that sickness and death are often such a clinical procedure that there can sometimes be a real neglect of the *person*. Lives are being saved, but the person whose life it is is being lost. Patients can be isolated from everything they knew to be normal, home and familiar things, friends and relatives in familiar surroundings; and all this goes unchecked. They can be in a medical paradise, but a spiritual void. All this reminds me of how important it is for us to visit the sick — and reminds me personally of how important a role it was,

when I was a hospital chaplain, giving sick people some time, some love, and some hope and faith too.

Friday, 11<sup>th</sup> February, was this year's World Day of Prayer for the Sick in the Church. This is always timed to fall on the feast day of Our Lady of Lourdes; probably you all know how much Lourdes has come to be associated with giving to the sick and disabled the dignity of acceptance, and the encouragement of faith. This connection of the sick with Lourdes dates right back to the apparitions of Our Blessed Lady to St Bernadette in 1858. A couple of cures occurred at the shrine even during the relatively short period of a fortnight or so during which Bernadette saw Our Lady appear to her; and many other cures quickly followed. As a result, the tradition of pilgrimage, processions and penance associated with the shrine at Lourdes for the last century and a half has always incorporated the bringing of sick pilgrims too. Not that all come in some over-eager expectation of a miraculous cure, but they come in expectation of a *welcome* and an *acceptance* in their frailty and extra needs as people with

sickness and disability. What spiritual fruitfulness it is, for those in such physical need to receive in Lourdes the time, care, and assistance of so many other pilgrims. In Lourdes, the sick pilgrims are at the centre of the pilgrimage community. This models exactly what human society should be about in God's sight: the most vulnerable, rather than pushed to the margins, are at the very heart, so that they are cared for with the greatest respect. In Lourdes most especially, this is in evidence; the whole person, spirit, soul and body, is attended to — truly holistic care for the human being, made in God's image and likeness. In fact, one might say that going to Lourdes, one sees the whole Church in miniature, the Church in action — love of neighbour and love of God truly active, and in perfect harmony. Really uplifting and inspiring.

Much of what Lourdes stands for, then, is just what Dr Elizabeth Kübler-Ross recognised was missing in much modern-day treatment of the sick. Lourdes expresses a mother's love, the concern of Our Lady for every one of her Son's followers. Lourdes shows that time and patient

care *are* available for people if only we make a little effort. Lourdes also reminds us that it is the sick themselves who often set the example — models of extraordinary patience in the face of enormous suffering, and of holiness in seeing God's goodness at work in the difficulties. Our Lady's shrine at Lourdes is a place where all can learn from a mother's love the supreme advantage of knowing Christ, Jesus her Son who underwent such sufferings.

Assisting at Lourdes with the sick is a key part of our Newman House year and outreach work, as we began to mention last Sunday. I have been going to Lourdes to help with the sick and disabled ever since I was an undergrad, from my student chaplaincy, and have now been 32 times — on average once a year since 1988, until Covid hit. It is something that I would highly recommend; just as I was invited to go when a student, and 'got hooked,' so I strongly urge you to consider coming this summer (late July, for a week) — we are able to provide a generous discount for the pilgrimage, owing to a grant that we have already been promised.

Of course, Lourdes is a very special place where our faith in the meaning of suffering is particularly in focus. But wherever we may be, our faith should be the familiar place which makes us feel at home, even in sickness. If we neglect our need of God day and night, then sickness and death can lead to fears and anger. It's common to hear expressions such as 'Why me?' / 'I never imagined I would end up like this' / 'What have I done wrong that God punishes me like this?' / 'I have got to blame somebody.'

But the holiest people I meet are people who in sickness never seem to grumble; who wouldn't give you any idea of the pain they're in; who still think of others even though they're the ones in need. From somewhere they seem to find the faith for expressions like: 'Lord, You suffered too, make me like You' / 'Lord, I need You every moment of the day in all this' / 'Lord, I know that I've done wrong, and I do need to make it up to You.'

These two contrasting approaches are like the two ways which the readings speak of today — one way is about trust in *ourselves*; the other way is about trust in

*God*. One way is about our *own* attempts to heal ourselves; the other is about letting *God's* power heal us in His own way and in His own time, which may not necessarily be in this life. If we take the way of total reliance on God, as Jesus suggests, then we're not only coming to God in times of affliction, praying just when things are bad, but praying at all times, open to the truth about life, that it is God-given, rather than insulating ourselves from that truth, and pretending we're on top of it all, ... because we never are!

Jeremiah's words about the tree by the stream could precisely describe a sick person whose roots of faith already run very deep through prayer: *when the heat comes it feels no alarm, its foliage stays green; it has no worries in a year of drought, and never ceases to bear fruit*. And perhaps, mindful of the devoted attitude of Our Lord to the sick, in today's Gospel passage — *they came to hear Him and be cured of their diseases* — we could imagine Jesus adding these words to the version of His beatitudes we also heard: "Blessed are the sick, for they can experience God's healing touch; alas for those who have never been ill, for

they may not realise their vital need for God.”

Let me end with some of the words of Pope Francis in his Letter for this year’s World Day of Prayer for the Sick (n. 5):

If the worst discrimination suffered by the poor — including the sick, who are poor in health — is the lack of spiritual attention, we cannot fail to offer them God’s closeness, His blessing and His word, as well as the celebration of the Sacraments and the opportunity for a journey of growth and maturation in faith. In this regard, I would like to remind everyone that closeness to the sick and their pastoral care is not only the task of certain specifically designated ministers; visiting the sick is an invitation that Christ addresses to all His disciples. How many sick and elderly people are living at home and waiting for a visit! The ministry of consolation is a task for every baptized person, mindful of the word of Jesus: “I was sick and you visited me” (*Mt* 25:36).

Please God, that invitation of Pope Francis you might hear also as an invitation to Lourdes this year as a helper on the Westminster pilgrimage.