

5th Sunday OT (B)

4th February 2024

‘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 Irish priest, Fr O’Hanlon, 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 his saying to me, as we chatted on the day before my ordination, 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 too much with 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; it served me well a few years later when I too was appointed to be a full-time hospital chaplain, a role I undertook for 5½ yrs.

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, 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. St Paul wasn’t. Mary wasn’t. *Jesus* 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 technical, bio-medical expertise, 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 the 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 today’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’re 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 it off and put it off’ until the dying hours. A *conscious* person is better able to be comforted by the priest, reconciled with God through confession, and 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

ferently 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; and (ii) to accept what we can't understand as having a meaning in God's plan. We might not be able to explain it in this life, but that's OK — we're human, but God is God. And God has it all in hand.

In a specific way, the ministry and personal example of Jesus Christ sets the scene for us: we Christians should indeed be devoted to the relief of the sick. In Mk 1, the very first chapter of his Gospel, one cannot get away from the fact that the very first thing for which Christ is known is his attention to the sick. All the Gospels tell the same: not just one here, one there, but crowds and crowds of them, gathered around the door of Simon's house, completely blocking the entrance, desperate for Jesus's healing touch. This has coloured greatly the commitment of the Church to healthcare; and for huge portions of history, in Christian Europe and way beyond, the Church has been the major provider of hospitals, medicine, and nursing. The oldest hospital in London — St Bartholomew's, in the City — celebrated its *900th anniversary* last year; it was founded in

1123 by a courtier of King Henry I, who was also an Augustinian prior and established both hospital and priory there on its current site, after recovering from a grave illness in Rome when on pilgrimage. Even today the Church is a major healthcare provider across the world. So I'd like to say to those of you who are *healthcare students* at universities here in London: you are a very valuable part of the Church's mission. Whether you're in medicine, nursing, pharmacy, physiotherapy, or any of the plethora of allied disciplines, you do have a special role in the plan of God, to help administer healing to the sick, after the mind of Christ. Especially those of you doing a medicine degree, which I know does seem to go on for ever: do be encouraged by Jesus the divine healer; His compassion for the sick knew no bounds.

At the same time, it's also worth admitting that medicine and healthcare is fraught with ethical dilemmas, dealing as it does with the liminal events of life of death: of being conceived, being born, and dying. As Christians we believe that God Himself, our Creator, sets boundaries to what is right & wrong within these areas of medical practice. Not everything that one can accomplish technically is moral; navigating this can be tough and demand much clarity of thought, but to address these

matters is also vitally important, so that good is done and evil avoided. To that end, the King's chaplain for the Guy's site, Laurence Jasper, has organised another of his annual online courses of [Catholic Medical Ethics](#) for students of healthcare professions. The course will be co-ordinated by the intellectually solid Anscombe Centre, the Catholic bioethics unit. It begins tomorrow, Monday 5th, but Laurence has told me that he's willing to accept sign-ups right up to tomorrow morning. I can guarantee that it will be good. [More info from me in coffee after Mass.]

A final thought regarding our personal calling as Newman House students to the care of the sick in the name of Jesus. I want to flag up for you all the amazing opportunity to come to Lourdes in late July with Cardinal Vincent and the diocesan pilgrimage: it's a very happy, holy, & hard-working week, in which we provide some of the direct personal care — some lighter, some heavier — for the sick and more-frail members of the pilgrimage. We form a group of 20+ Newman House students each year, to be part of the *St Frai* helpers, working in the 'pilgrim hospital,' alongside our hotel. We're in the process of applying for a grant to give student participants a big discount (last year, about 67% off) so as to allow you to

afford it. I've been going to Lourdes ever since my own student-chaplaincy days 35 yrs ago, and can highly recommend it. Just recently I went to a funeral in a London parish — it was of a deacon of our diocese, Anthony, who had a great love for Lourdes, and who came to stay with us last year in the *St Frai*, and was cared for by some of our Newman House group. His chance to go to Lourdes one last time before his cancer brought his life to an end was so important to him, spiritually. Without the *St Frai* helpers — and especially without the big cohort that Newman House provides each year — pilgrims like Anthony couldn't have gone to Lourdes; and Lourdes is and should be centred on the sick. Do think about responding to the invitation to come, when in a few weeks we advertise the places. Sr Carolyn is always willing to talk to any student about just what it entails, and to dispel any concerns.

LOVING FATHER, Your Son accepted our sufferings to teach us the virtue of patience in human illness. Hear the prayers we offer for our sick brothers and sisters. May all who suffer pain, illness or disease realise that they are chosen to be saints, and know that they are joined to Christ in His suffering for the salvation of the world. Who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.