

FEBRUARY 5, 2012 – 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The gospel reading for today is presented as a contrast to the first reading. The first reading is Job's lament. Job himself questions God. Job is suffering and he calls out to God to explain himself. "My pain is more than I can bear. I can't sleep at night. I shall not see happiness again." Job questions God, his goodness, why he has allowed pain to exist. God finally appears to Job in chapter 38 and asks him: If you know so much as to question me, then where were you when I created the world. How is it that the heavens work, the sun and the moon. Were you there helping me when I created the whale? And so forth. Job realizes that he has spoken foolishly and submits to God's wisdom.

Job's lament is the cry we all feel within ourselves when we become seriously ill, or, perhaps, even more, when someone we love, a spouse, a child or a parent become ill or even die. Perhaps our hurt is not physical. Perhaps it is emotional. A marriage breaks up, a child runs away, a friend is publicly discredited. When we feel pain, regardless of its source, we want to join Job and say, "I shall never see happiness again."

It is to prove this lament wrong that Jesus comes as the Divine Healer. In the Gospel for today he heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever. He heals people with all sorts of illnesses including possession which refers both to diabolic possession and psychological, or psychiatric illnesses. Jesus heals so many people that he has to find a solitary place in the desert for a few moments of union with his Father. But even then, Simon Peter and the others find him and make him go back to work.

Jesus heals. He heals the pain not just of the people of the past, but the pain of the people of today. Some receive physical healing immediately. Others receive healing in stages. Some receive a clear miracle. Others who have dedicated their lives to continuing the healing ministry of the Lord, have developed their own skills and intelligence to be vehicles of the Lord's healing. The union with the Divine Healer is the reason why our doctors, and our nurses, and all care givers deserve our respect. All who call out to the Lord are healed. Some are healed physically. Some are healed emotionally, able to accept their condition in life. All receive spiritual healing as they unite their pain to the Cross of Christ. We who carry Christ within us, carry within us the one who heals. If we believe in him, if we trust in him, then we refuse to join Job's cry of despair. We recognize that Christ is present when we need him the most, healing our internal and our external turmoil.

It is in this context that we can best understand the Sacrament of Healing, the Sacrament of the Sick. This is Christ being really present – in a sacrament at a particular time in our lives when we need his healing power. When our loved ones are seriously ill, we are challenged in our faith. The sacrament of the sick gives us the courage to hold on to our faith in the face

of this challenge. This sacrament provides healing, sometimes physical, sometimes emotional, always spiritual. When we feel that no one could possibly understand what we are going through, the one, who St. Paul tells us in the second reading, became all things to all people, joins us in our suffering.

The administration of the sacrament of the sick is the reason why I visit parishioners in the hospital and at home who are seriously ill. The sacrament of the sick is a sacrament for the living, not the dead. Do not wait until a loved one is expiring to call a priest. Do not look for this sacrament hours after a person has died. The sacrament is ineffective unless it has a live subject who is seeking healing, physical, emotional or spiritual. When a loved one has died, say the prayers for the dead, but it is too late for the anointing to have any effect. Call for a priest when you know that there is a serious situation, and that a person has not received this sacrament in the last number of months.

When we administer the Sacrament of the Sick, the priest uses some of the Oil of the Sick that is blessed at the Chrism Mass during Holy Week. He puts some oil on the person's head and hands and says, "through this Holy Anointing may the Lord in his love and his mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up." In this sacrament the Lord is present as he was to Simon Peter's mother, to the possessed, to the sick, to the crippled, to all who are hurting.

When a loved one does die, have a funeral Mass or a memorial Mass for him or her. To me, it is one of the saddest things to see a person denied a Mass who had come to Mass every week of their lives. Don't let funeral directors talk you into taking the cheapest route possible and therefore cut out the Church. Cut the fancy coffin or the number of limos, or just have a Memorial Mass after a cremation, but don't deny the loved one the special intercession of Christ on the Cross that is Holy Mass.

Heavy stuff today. Well, that is what you get when you start with Job. We have to be realistic, though. Every one of us will die. But that is not the end. Once fully united to the Lord we will feel love more than we could ever imagine. And for the transition. Yes, it can be frightening. But we are not alone. Jesus is always with us. He is there to protect us from the doubts and despair that plagued Job. He is there to give us the courage to walk with him to the threshold of a new life. Jesus heals.