

## Healed and whole to love and to serve

**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year – Cycle B – 7 February 2021**

**Readings:** Job 7:1-4, 6-7; 1 Cor 9:16-19; Mk 1:29-39

*“Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them” (Mk 1:31)*

Prologue: Illness is one of the key enemies over which Jesus takes authority in the first few chapters of Mark’s Gospel (see 1:29-31, 32-34, 40-42; 2:1-12). Jesus has come to proclaim the Kingdom of God, wherein people will be restored to health and fullness of life. This includes all the dimensions of human life: physical, mental, moral, religious, psychological and social. We can make a distinction between ‘*cure*’, referring to the bodily, physical aspect and ‘*healing*’ which is the internal, psycho-spiritual-holistic aspect—a process that leads to awakening and service.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The Book of Job, written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, belongs to the stage when the idea of individual retribution—i.e., the traditional theory that the good are rewarded and the wicked punished *in this life*—ran into insoluble, practical difficulties. The ‘dilemma’ highlighted in Job’s life is this: that he *is* and *knows* that he is an innocent, good man, and yet he suffers immense destruction of his property, deaths of his family members and is finally laid low with a loathsome sore-infested disease. His three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar—who are champions of ‘orthodoxy’, unquestionably accept the theory of retribution, and urge Job to review his past carefully and confess that he is, indeed, a sinner, deserving the punishment that God has now given him. Job initially attempts to respond to their probing and prodding in chapters 6 & 7, the latter being a monologue on the miseries of life. In today’s passage, Job compares his life to: (a) forced military service, (b) drudgery of a labourer and (c) slavery, three of the proverbially wretched states of life. He sees life as meaningless, full of “months of emptiness, nights of misery” (v.3), akin to a mere “breath”. In sum, Job becomes a model of a good, innocent person grappling with the problem of suffering, unable to understand the ‘why?’ of it all; finally, entrusting himself to God. The Second Testament will provide meaning to this ‘why?’ in the mysterious light of the cross and the love of a God who is with us, ever accompanying us in our sufferings.
2. The gospel reading gives an insight into Jesus’ daily timetable: “In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (v.35). In the midst of intense activity that earns the admiration of everyone, Jesus feels the need to distance himself from his work, his disciples and his admirers, so as to spend quality time in intimate communion with God through silence and solitude. While lesser mortals would’ve rested on their laurels, Jesus will neither be swayed by success nor programmed by popularity pulls “of the whole city gathered around the door” (v.33). Simon & co. seem mighty pleased at Jesus’ phenomenal success, informing him: “Everyone is searching for you...” (v.37). Unimpressed, Jesus replies, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out *to do*” (v.38). Jesus is detached from worldly pursuits and focused totally on God. One single passion—namely, doing God’s will—draws Jesus inward in prayer, directs his outward movements and gives dynamism to all that he says and does. This energizing ‘Centre’, God’s Spirit, is also the balm that not only comforts Jesus, but will flow out to cure, heal and empower all those who will either approach him directly or will be “brought to him” by others: those sick or possessed with demons (v.32).

3. Jesus's day is packed with what today we would call 'the healing ministry'. Curing sicknesses and driving out demons surely restores individuals to function better. However, more important is the social function of reinstating the sick and the suffering into their families and their communities. Simon's mother-in-law becomes a model or 'prototype' of one who has not only been 'cured' but totally 'healed' and geared towards serving. Two details are noteworthy in this healing miracle: (i) Jesus "took her by the hand and *lifted* her up" (v.31). The Greek verb *egeiro* is often used to refer to Jesus' own 'being *lifted* up' or '*raised* up' at resurrection (see Mk 14:28; 16:6; 1 Cor 15:4; Acts 3:15); and (ii) Peter's mother-in-law "began to serve them" indicates her inner total healing that led her to service. Jesus' touch is like a transfusion of new life flowing within her. Jesus' service to her becomes her service to others. Her healing and wholeness bring fullness to those around her. It's vital to note that Jesus' cures and miracles are neither ends in themselves nor pointers to his extraordinary powers. Rather, he did "not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him" (as Son of God), since his true identity will be known only on the Cross, when he himself "will be raised up" and will reveal the ultimate meaning of suffering, death and rising. Thus, all miracles are to be seen as foretaste of this final healing: from death to life eternal.

### **Linking the Second Reading and the Psalm to the Theme of Healing and Ministry:**

Paul is passionate about preaching Christ. He admits that "an obligation is laid on me," therefore, "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (v.16). He sees his preaching of the Gospel not only as an obligation, but also as a God-given reward. Preaching must be gratuitously done, with the attitude of a generous "slave" (v.18). If at all there is any 'motive' for Paul, it is only to bring more and more people to know, love and serve God. He says strikingly: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (v.22). The refrain of the psalm (147): "Praise the Lord who heals the brokenhearted!" are words of the *anawim*—the orphan, widow and stranger—who, traditionally, were the ones who God specially opted to help, and who, today, ought to be the ones we ought to preferentially serve.

### **Three Contextual Challenges:**

1. *To seek distance for discernment*: Our days are filled with many good things we '*do*' but do we spend time in communion with God asking ourselves: what is my/our motive for all this *doing*? Am I really doing God's will and not driven by popularity or power?
2. *To strive for healing, not just cure*: Many people—as during this pandemic—may not be fully cured physically but *healed* interiorly. Their weaknesses and pains may persist, but they might have found inner peace and deeper meaning in all their sufferings.
3. *To become all things for all people*: In order to be effective servants of the Good News, it's important to adjust and adapt so as to touch people's lives *at their level*. So, in order to evangelize, we ought to be mother, father, sister, brother, friend, etc., as and when the need arises. A woman wary of pedophile priests cautioned her child to avoid priests until she saw one doing somersaults to attract the kids' attention during catechism class. "That's a holy man!" she thought to herself.

**Food for Thought:** Brokenhearted after the untimely death of her husband, a woman visited a counselor to seek comfort and cure. Sobbing bitterly, the widow poured out her tale of woe. The counselor listened patiently and said softly, "Friend, I can't wipe away your tears, but I can teach you how to make them holy!" God doesn't take away Job's sufferings but makes them meaningful. Jesus came not only to cure, but to heal ... and to make holy and whole.

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