

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Rising early before dawn, Jesus went off to a deserted place and prayed there. Simon and those who were with him went looking for him, and when they found him said: "Everyone is looking for you." Jesus replied: "Let us go to the nearby villages so that I can preach there, too. For this is why I have come..." Jesus cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not allowing them to speak because they knew who he was."

Mark 1, 29-39

"Life is a struggle, isn't it? It's a life sentence to hard labour. Like farm-hands longing for knock-off time, with nothing to look forward to except pay-day."

Job 7, 1-4, 6-7



Today's gospel gives us a glimpse into the demands that were made on Jesus and his disciples as they went about their ministry. It also makes the point that Jesus needed to find time-out to pray, and reflect on his experiences.

On hearing the story of how Jesus cured Peter's mother-in-law, the cynics among us might be inclined to rush in and criticise the disciples : "Typical men! Helpless when it comes to getting a meal. Only interested in their own stomachs, they asked Jesus to heal the poor woman, so that she could get out of bed and wait on them!"

I'm afraid that's a contemporary spin which I'm sure Mark did not intend. The point he is making is that close encounters with Jesus are life-changing. The only real response that one can make is to imitate Jesus by launching into serving others. The essence of discipleship is service.

Following the cure of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, Jesus engages in a frenzy of curing the sick and infirm and casting out demons that were controlling people's lives.

This healing ministry of Jesus set the benchmark for Christians down through the centuries. As a consequence, caring for the sick and disabled has become one of the Church's identifying works of mercy. Over time, we have come to give special status to doctors and nurses, mental-health workers, therapists, hospital chaplains, carers of the elderly, community nurses and live-in carers.

The healing that Jesus did and the way in which people through the ages have cared for the sick, the weak and the elderly is a visible reminder of how God deals with all of us in our weakness, be that weakness physical, moral or emotional. The prevailing culture has tended to glory in strength. It lauds physical strength and broad shoulders, promotes attractive bodies and bronzed complexions, prizes the sheen of health and rewards the glow of talent. If we are not careful, we can be seduced into thinking that such things are vital in our relationships with others, even with God.

We are sometimes less sure that God or others can relate to us when these endowments go missing. We need to be reminded that, while God rejoices with us in all our wonderful attributes and accomplishments, they are not central to our relationship with God. God loves us for who we are - fragile, faltering human beings, singled out by God for another kind of glory where the accomplishment is God's, and ours the gratitude.

The human condition means that pain and suffering, ill-health and limitation will almost certainly touch the lives of all of us. However, the gloomy Job of today's first reading is far from the message of hope that Jesus proclaimed as he went about mending broken bodies, minds and hearts. His message, proclaimed in action, was that God does notice and that God cares.

God's care and compassion are, of course, reflected in the actions of all those people who look after the sick. They put up with the smells, they clean up repeatedly after accidents, they remember the schedules for medication, they make courageous decisions to act or, indeed, not to act. Such decisions are critical. They absorb the anger and the emotional disarray of patients. And they listen sympathetically as fear and pain transform sick people into demanding, unreasonable, mischievous children. And they deal with relatives - sometimes anxious and demanding, at other times glaringly noticeable by their absence.

We may well ask how health-care professionals deal with the constant reminder of their own mortality that they get from the people for whom they care. There was a time when people believed that nurses, to be credible, had to catch the illness from which their patients were suffering. While the name of Fr. Damien of Molokai springs to mind here, that romantic idea has fortunately evaporated. There is also a stoic view that carers have to be totally dispassionate and objective, firm and unfeeling, if they are to care properly for their patients. In reality, healers are touched by the misery, pain, despair and debilitation that they deal with every day. In today's second reading, Paul says: "I made myself everybody's slave in order to win as many people as possible...To the weak I became a weak person with a view to winning over the weak." (1 Corinthians 9, 19-22) Paul made a decision to let the actual condition of others touch him personally, so that he might deal with them realistically. That's the kind of challenge that faces those who care for the sick. In his recent Australia Day address, prominent neurosurgeon, Charlie Teo, echoed something of Paul and, in the process, gave us an insight into today's gospel:

"... my view of an Aussie was someone who was hard working, unaffected, genuine, affable, relaxed, egalitarian, irreverent and charitable. I still believe most Aussies share these appealing qualities, although I am saddened by the increasing incidents of rage in our society. Once there was only road rage but now it seems to have spread into the workplace, the malls and even the last bastion of the laid-back, free spirited Aussie, the surf! I don't wish to trivialise the adversities of everyday life, but when a mother has just lost her son to brain cancer, or a husband his wife, or a daughter her father, and I see this 7 days a week, 365 days of the year, it makes the driver who overtakes on the left or the surfer who cuts in on your wave, seem so inconsequential. I am sure, if you are one of those angry people, if you could spend a day in my shoes, you would rapidly attain a more realistic perspective that the most important determinant of happiness is our health and the health of our loved ones.

Brain cancer kills more children than any other cancer, more women under the age of 35 than any other cancer and more men under the age of 44 than any other cancer. It is totally indiscriminate and accounts for more person years lost than any other cancer. I am forced to deal with these statistics on a very human level every day. But quite separate to giving me a balanced perspective on life, I am in awe of the dignity and courage that my patients consistently demonstrate in their struggle with cancer."

Was it any different for Jesus? Today's gospel presents him surrounded by sick people. What did it do to him? Did it churn him up inside? Did he ask himself if the aching mass of humanity he witnessed would ever find relief? Whatever Jesus thought or however he felt, Mark tells us that at the end of the day, Jesus went off to pray. And when the disciples came and sought him out, his response was to set out on another round of healing and caring. The sustaining message out of this for all of us and for all involved in caring professions is that God really does care.