

Proper 1, Year B, Septuagesima.

Is 40: 21-end. Ps 147. 1 Cor 9: 16-23. Mk 1: 29-39

That Gospel passage we've just heard is one of the healing stories. You can take the words literally: Jesus performed miracles. Maybe he did. Certainly, inexplicable healings occur. We hear of them at Lourdes, at Knock, at Clonfert. Sometimes they're ascribed to seventh sons of seventh sons. I have no experience of them, although I have come across ways in which human biology has done the unexpected and inexplicable.

The trouble with taking the New Testament literally is that we need to know how the original Greek was used by the writer and by the people he was writing for. For example, in today's gospel the word translated as *fever* might not mean fever as caused by infection, but may mean *agitated*, or in a rage. If Peter's mother in law was lying in a rage, then a visit by her son-in-law's enigmatic friend might have perked her up wonderfully. I'm careful about taking the Bible literally: to do that is itself a form of idolatry. Bibliolatry. Remember that middle-eastern people use much more colourful images than we do. Remember that they dramatize situations much more than we do. The Bible needs interpreting.

So how else might we look at the healing stories? As I've said before, I take *healing* not to mean medical cure. After all, we're all going to die sooner or later, and there is no medical cure of that. Medical cure of one disease simply means that we'll die of something else later. Not recognising that is one reason why so much money is poured into the health services and why doctors are able to live so well, funded by the folly of patients who think that they might live for ever.

The way in which I interpret *healing* is of salving, being made whole, restoring integrity, soothing, being given reassurance much as a child that has fallen over seeks reassurance from a parent. This sort of healing is what we, broken humanity, need. Look at the political situation. Look at the way we suffer from the greed and foolishness of a pampered few and their cronies.

Much of the gospel is written to send messages to its readers. Perhaps the message here is that when we heed Jesus' example of how to live life and conduct themselves, it gives us a freedom of the spirit: not freedom to do selfishly what we choose, but freedom from the shackles of greed, avarice, the expectations of others and the fashions of the time.

We all can be healers. We can become Christs—that is what happens at Baptism. The old life is washed away and we're born again into a life that tries to heed his example. This is what it means when we say we're clothed with Christ. We become agents of salvation, agents of healing: making life better here and now. We're capable of being agents of reassurance, agents of hope, fighters against injustice—yes, fighting can be a healing act. My ordination vows oblige me to admonish you – to warn of consequences, to point you away from the wrong road and towards the right road. The church assumes that because I have studied the scriptures and reflected upon their meaning I am better placed to do this. I am not ordained to be nice, or to allow you to do what I know will be bad for you, but to warn. This too is a healing act. And maybe Jesus told Peter's mother in law to stop feeling sorry for herself, to get up out of bed and get a grip on herself. Maybe I should be doing more of that. I've come across people whose companionship makes me feel happier, and when we feel happier, our immune systems can perk up, so these people are healers.

We needn't worry that our own faults make us incapable of being healers. It's these imperfections, when other people see them, that help us to understand one other. When we see someone else's faults, and that they acknowledge them, we feel more kindly disposed to them. This is the first stage of healing. This is why politicians who never acknowledge their mistakes are so rightly scorned. Why spin doctors are reviled. It is the reason why church people who appear in their pretentious complacency to have all the answers are sneered at. I view it as one of my tasks to make plain my faults for all to see. It was the wounds to Jesus' human body that did the healing work.

All this calls for us to speak to each other from our hearts. Heart to heart. Let's put aside any facade of smooth perfection, and acknowledge that we all need healing from our demons within: demons of childhood hurts; or resentments of the past that we refuse to let go; or addictions to attitudes, to chemicals, to ways of behaving. We need healing from all the things that are thieves of our true selves. The world needs openness and honesty—and I do not see it much in evidence. As we sung earlier, *Let all thy converse be sincere ...* This is prophetic work. People who call for openness and honesty are always crucified one way or another. I know that if I'm not being criticised by someone, I'm not doing my job properly.

In all this, let us not forget ourselves. We 'heal' others better if we pay attention to our own needs first. And recently we have heard some extraordinary insights into how we might go about this. A palliative care nurse has published a book in which she has recorded the most often heard regrets of the dying. Here are some of them:

- *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.* Most people die knowing that their lives have been limited by their choices.

- *I wish I hadn't worked so hard.* This came from every male patient that the author nursed. It is true for me. I missed a good deal of my children's youth and Susan's companionship.
- *I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.* Many people don't say what they think so as to keep peace with others. As a result, they settle for a mediocrity. Many develop illnesses like heart disease and cancer that are associated with bitterness and resentment.
- *I wish that I had let myself be happier.* Happiness is a choice. Misery is a choice. People stay stuck in old patterns and habits. Fear of change makes us pretend to others, and to ourselves, that we are content, when deep within, we long to laugh and be silly. There is not enough innocent silliness in this world.

In today's gospel, when Simon's mother-in-law was restored to health, she responds by serving those around her. That's a great model for us all. It's what Paul says, amongst other things, in the epistle: if we recognize Christ's healing power—Christ's salvation, we have a duty to heal others, with the sensitivity that their situation demands, and we do so by using whatever means are at our disposal.

Let go of should and oughts. Let go of things that bind. Stride off into the future unencumbered. Live with delight. Bring delight to others. Be foolish for Christ. This is the Lord's work.