

# 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year

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Why is healing the sick so central to Our Lord's ministry? The answer may seem obvious, but if our spiritual welfare is more important, and ultimately we must die and take our place in our heavenly home, shouldn't we want to get there as quickly as possible? It is certainly a dilemma that St Paul reflects on. He would rather be with the Lord, but recognises he must serve his time here on earth. We are made for heaven, but we are also bodily creatures made for life on earth. This was not a mistake on God's part. If it had been he would not have shared our human nature in Jesus. Our mental and physical health matter to God because they affect us in the depths of our being.

Job is the prime example of this. The whole book is a reflection on the mystery of human suffering. Job is depicted as a good man with complete trust in God. However, he is beset by suffering. Invaders kill his family and destroy his home and livelihood. He is smitten with a painful skin disease. No wonder he sounds depressed. In pain time passes slowly. Will dawn never come? The day drags by. His friends try to persuade him that he must have done something to displease God. Throughout he perseveres in faith, acknowledging that human beings do not have all the answers, and in the end his health and prosperity are restored.

When we are ill, illness can take over and dominate our lives, putting our faith in God and in other people to the test. Some people lose faith altogether and become embittered. Our Lord knows this, and this is why he spends so much time with the sick. Healing of body and mind helps to restore equilibrium and frees us in spirit. It is true that we can accept suffering and unite it with the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. He helps us to carry the cross and gives it a positive value. This does not mean that we should not seek healing, whether by medical means, or through the prayer of the Church. Sickness healed gives glory to God.

I am sure we all pray for family or friends who are sick and for ourselves if we need healing, but often people are not as aware as they should be of the pastoral care Christ offers the sick through his Church. I will say something next week about the anointing of the sick, but the spiritual food of the Eucharist is given to us to strengthen and nourish us especially in times of weakness or ill-health. This need does not diminish when people become frail or housebound – on the contrary it becomes greater. Yet sometimes people are reluctant to bother the priest, as they see it, to bring them Communion at home, or feel that to do so is some kind of admission of failure. I would urge all of you, if you cannot attend Mass for an extended period, or you know of housebound family or neighbours, to let me know. Bringing you Our Lord is not a burden, but a privilege. The availability of Eucharistic Ministers today means that it is possible for people to receive on a Sunday, or more frequently than once a week, if they would like. For some, quite apart from the Eucharist, the regular contact with the parish, and people outside the family or neighbours, is important. Taking a newsletter to them, dropping in for a chat, spending a few moments in prayer with them bring them the touch of Christ.

When people go into hospital, taking an active role like this is even more important. Many still do not realise that the great majority of hospitals interpret Data Protection Legislation and other laws intended to safeguard privacy to mean that they may not ask or record the religious beliefs of patients. You will not receive any spiritual ministrations in hospital unless you or your family directly ask the hospital staff to arrange this, or tell your own priest and ask him to contact the hospital chaplain. A number of times I have discovered that parishioners were in hospital only by accident or after they have come home and expressed surprise at not seeing a priest. The Gospel tells us how people brought their sick to Jesus. You need to do the same by making their needs known as well as through personal prayer.