

6th Sunday of Year

Today we hear the story of a leper healed by Jesus. Lepers were barred from taking part in the life of the community, even its worship. It was a life of social isolation, an emotional as well as a bodily affliction. For the leper that Jesus reached out, and touched him must have been almost as overwhelming as then finding that he was cured of his leprosy.

Sometimes Jesus heals at a distance, or at the entreaty of someone else. On other occasions he looks for some expression of faith. He makes also use of signs to heal: spittle and the laying on of hands, mud and washing. The sick try to touch him, "for power came forth from him and healed them all." And so in the sacraments Christ continues to "touch" us in order to heal us.

"Moved by so much suffering Christ not only allows himself to be touched by the sick, but he makes their miseries his own: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." But he did not heal all the sick. His healings were signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through his Passover. On the cross Christ took upon himself the whole weight of evil and took away the "sin of the world," of which illness is only a consequence. By his passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion."

Our Lord makes his disciples share in his ministry of compassion and healing: "So they went out and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them." We know from the Letter of St James that the first generation of Christians continued to do this, praying over the sick and anointing them with oil. "Is any man sick among you? Let him bring in the priests of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith shall save the sick man. And the Lord shall raise him up: and if he be in sins, they shall be forgiven him." James 5: 14-15. The Church still does this today.

The sacrament of the sick is intended for anyone who is seriously ill, or frail as a result of age and infirmity, not simply those who are at the moment of death. Unfortunately people came to understand the term 'extreme unction', which simply meant the last anointing we receive in life, to imply that it was only for someone at death's door. In fact the ritual always presupposed that the person would be conscious, and able to receive Holy Communion on that and later occasions. We should ensure that anyone who is seriously ill receives the sacrament in good time, preferably while they are able to understand the prayers and to receive Communion. It can be conferred again if their condition deteriorates.

The sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is given to those who are seriously ill by a priest anointing them on the forehead and hands with duly blessed oil saying: "Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord, who frees you from sin, save you and raise you up."

Through this sacrament we receive a number of blessings and graces:

- The Holy Spirit unites us to the passion of Christ, for our own good and that of the whole Church;
- Strengthening, peace, and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age;
- Forgiveness of sins, if we are unable to receive this through the sacrament of penance, e.g. if we cannot speak or are unconscious;
- Restoration of health if the Lord feels this is what is best for our ultimate good;
- Preparation to enter into eternal life and meet the Lord face to face.