

Fr. John's Homily for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2-4-2024

JMJ CHS

A few weeks back in my bulletin article I said I might soon be prepared to share some thoughts about my new situation. Well, I guess today is the day because the readings would seem to suggest it. They are about the mystery of suffering

It has probably happened to all of you already, but if not, there will surely come a time when you are "laid low". An illness or injury of some sort, or maybe something else entirely. And the length of the ordeal will vary. It could be a few days, a few months, a few years. Maybe even a lifetime. Or you could have more than one. And the interesting thing is that this downtime, this cross you carry, may actually be, a gift.

I learned this Catholic concept quite early on when I was in my early 20s. I had a lengthy stay in the hospital along with a recuperation time at home. But after only a few months, I was able to look back on my experience and say that, for the very first time in my life, I was actually forced to think about things that truly mattered. I had time on my hands. I wasn't going anywhere and so what an opportunity for God to get my attention and the Holy Spirit to speak to my soul... I no longer had to worry about getting drafted. And I wasn't even worried about finishing my college degree. A new horizon was slowly and imperceptibly opening up for me and I began to wonder about God's hand in all of this.

Mine was certainly not a unique experience. You might remember the story of a young Spanish soldier who got injured in battle. In the nursing home he asked if they had any books on chivalry, war or romance. Something he could read to help pass the time. No, there was nothing like that, but there was a book on the life of Christ. He went for it, and it changed his life. It was St. Ignatius of Loyola who went on to found the religious order called The Society of Jesus. The Jesuits.

Today's first reading is from the story of Job. I trust you are all familiar with it. It is considered one of the oldest books in the Bible and it addresses the ancient and universal question of suffering. And Job really suffered. In some kind of a mysterious test, God allowed Satan access to this righteous man. Everything, absolutely everything was taken from Job except his wife and those few friends who came to console him.

Job was also physically afflicted, seemingly to the point of despair. In the end, God confronts Job face-to-face. He doesn't explain the whys and the wherefores of this test, but simply points out that He is God and Job is not. Job is humbled; he covers his mouth and says no more, and God restores him to health and wealth.

This was one of the stories I reflected on when I was recuperating back then and it had an impact on me. It began my journey of study and reflection, helping me to better understand the mystery of suffering. The theology of the cross. There was a passage in the story that I found particularly helpful from Chapter 33. " But God does speak, in a dream, in a vision of the night, while men slumber in their beds... Or someone may be chastened on a bed of pain with constant distress in their bones, so that their body finds food repulsive and their soul loathes even the choicest nourishment. Their flesh wastes

away to nothing and their bones stick out... God does all these things to a person – twice, even three times – to turn them back from the pit, that the light of life might shine on them.” That time back in the 70’s was my first time. There was a second time while I was in the seminary, and well, it seems as if this is the third time. Maybe I still have something to learn.

Back at the beginning of this January when my problems started, I was kinda stressed out. I had turned yellow, my doctor quickly diagnosed the symptoms and said something about my having “a few mountains to climb”. I think he had a good sense of what might be in store for me. I soon had a procedure, which failed, and they were not able to schedule a new one for about a week. I was able to do the Tuesday evening Mass and well, things got a bit emotional up here. At the end, I told the small crowd gathered that night that I chose as my mantra the words of young Mary at the Annunciation. The Angel Gabriel asked her if she was willing? And she responded, “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy word.” Be it done unto me! No different really than when we utter those words in the Lord’s Prayer, “...may Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” Or Jesus’ word in the garden. “If it’s possible Father, let this cup pass from me; but, not my will but Thine will be done.”

I also shared with them another short prayer that I would be using and I invited them to join me. It is part of a devotion I have where I say three times, “By Thy Precious Blood, O Jesus, purify and sanctify Thy priests.” (This priest).

You know, there are many pathways to healing. And God uses all of them, for different purposes, according to His own inscrutable, unsearchable will. Maybe he wants to elevate a holy person to sainthood. You know they need two miracles. wouldn’t it be cool to be that miracle for, say, the cause of Bishop Baraga? Or how about being blessed by a relic. A few years ago the Lord allowed a healing here at our parish through the relic of our patroness, St. Philomena. Someone recently loaned me a relic of St. Luke, the physician to St. Paul. I’m wearing it right now. Talk about friends in high places.

Maybe His plan is even bigger. God once allowed the healing waters of Lourdes to be the means of a conversion of a Nobel Prize-winning French doctor who had lost his faith in medical school. A miracle took place right before his very eyes, there at Lourdes, but he wouldn’t convert until he was on his deathbed 40 years later. He did, however, write a book about his experiences and how that miracle turned his world upside down. And that book, called, *Voyage to Lourdes*, has strengthened the faith of many others along the way.

And of course, there are faith healers like Bl. Fr. Solanus Casey and St. Padre Pio, who both had the gift of healing. There are also many charismatic pray-ers who pray over individuals with hands outstretched, with words of praise and worship. And then there are prayer warriors like you who get down on your knees and storm Heaven, pleading with the Lord for a particular cause.

And then, of course, we have the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. It’s biblical – there in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 6, it talks about Jesus sending his disciples two by

two out into the countryside where they preached and anointed with oil, healing many who were sick. I prefer this type of healing because it is natural to the priest, an extension to that passage from Mark. In fact, I have sought out anointings of my brother Priests here in the Deanery. I have got about five of them so far. It has to do with the idea of persistence in prayer.

And we have the instruction of the scriptures which encourages us to seek healing; Peter's mother-in-law; Jesus, Son of David, if you will it, you can heal me. I do will it. Be healed; the woman with the hemorrhage reached out and touched the tassel of his garment, and was healed. In all things by prayer and petition and with Thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. And at the Last Supper, He says to us through His disciples, "Heretofore you have not asked anything in my name. Ask, that you might receive, that your joy might be made full."

But I don't need to remind you that not all are healed ... not even for Jesus. Again, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me." We all know the answer was no. But we should know why.

Let me close with a passage from my favorite devotional book, *God Calling*. This was from the last day of January.

#### January 31 – Suffering Redeems

All sacrifice and all suffering is redemptive: to teach the individual or to be used to raise and help others.

Nothing is by chance.

Divine Mind, and its wonder working, is beyond your finite mind to understand.

No detail is forgotten in My Plans, already perfect.

~Fr. John