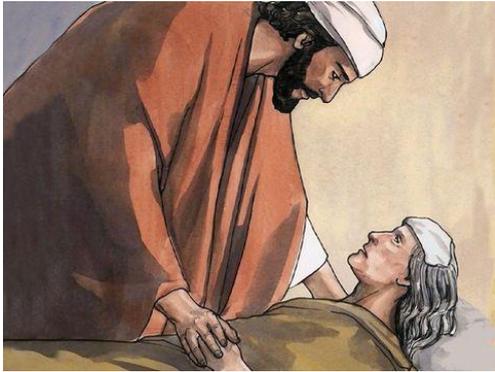


Homily for 5th Sunday of Ordinary Time



“Just typical, those men heal mother-in-law just so that she can get supper on the table.” That can be an immediate response to this gospel story.

However let’s look at the whole picture. Concentrate on the last part for a moment. Jesus goes up to a lonely place to pray. Always a distant place, one where he can find some peace. What is prayer for him? We know from the number of times he does this that he cannot manage without it. The peace he finds gives him the opportunity to be at one with his Father. It is clear that this relationship is Jesus’ powerhouse. Just him and his Father together. This is him recharging his batteries. It gives him strength. After facing a sea of sickness, of poverty and worry, days of being with the mentally ill, as with any person, it takes its toll. More so because of his love for each of these people. Because of his understanding, his compassion for each, which the disciples don’t really understand as they are often happy to send people away, Jesus is very much alone in his compassion and connection with each person in the deepest sense.

What he seeks from the Father therefore is not just communion but also strength. His strength comes from this union with the Father, the ‘oneness’ of the Trinity. Prayer here is not a modern ‘centring of himself’ or ‘focussing himself’, even seeking calmness. Prayer is communion, or community, with the Father that strengthens him in their shared task.

What does prayer do for Jesus? Well, it empowers him to love and to heal and preach. To engage with each sick person and their families, engaging deeply with them because he loves them.

What the particular story of Simon’s mother-in-law does is to move our focus from the crowds and make it personal. It is a short walk from the synagogue to the house (if you have been to Capernaum). What are the elements of Jesus’ healing ministry? That

others bring him to her, those who love her. That he takes her by the hand, which makes him unclean as she is sick and a woman, he overcomes the religious law, he touches her. This physical contact is a vital part of his ministry. It is more than just physical, what inspires him to break through the religious taboos is that it is an act of love, an act of sharing what he has received from his Father's love. It is an encounter with God.

Then he helps her up or in the original Greek, lifts her up. The word is the same word as used for his resurrection, his being lifted up. So there is more going on here than physical healing.

Yes, then she begins to wait on them – serve them. Some may not be impressed but as friends of her son-in-law this would have been something she would have wanted to do, but also on a deeper level more is happening here. The word for service here is the word from which our word 'deacon' has come. There is a response to service with service, a response to an act of love with an act of love.

As Jesus has served her and filled her with the Father's love, so she responds.

Nor has she just returned to her old state, she has experienced something far more intense that has changed her.

Can this tell us something about prayer? Why do we pray? We all know that we often ask for things in prayer, and there is nothing wrong with that, Jesus tells us to do it, he, at vital times, did it himself. We may use the prayers we have learnt and known for years, and wonderful prayers they are. But what is our goal? It has to be union, communion with God. Never something just for ourselves, but a coming together with God that strengthens us, build our relationship and then feeds us (after meeting God) to go out and try to walk in Jesus' footsteps, sharing what we receive in acts of love. Mother Elvira of Cenacolo said: God smiles at us and so, even if we do not feel happy or contented, we must share that smile that smile with others.

We may not have that wonderful sense that God is there, though we may, but like Jesus who always trusts he is, so we trust too.

Also, we have seen Jesus physically curing his mother-in-law, but, as I said, more is going on here. On commentator has made the distinction between a cure, such as a physical stitching up a wound, and true healing of the whole person. We could apply this I think to Climate Change. So often we think that in just sorting out an immediate problem, preventing the destruction of a vital resource, for example, we can then rest. But the real question comes from Pope Francis's invitation in *Laudato Si*. Do we feel we are one with all of God's creation? Do we sense, and I know this language does not suit everyone, that the destruction of a rain forest is a shared wound for all creation including ourselves? It wounds us. Until we do, then we can cure many ills, patch up creation, but real healing of the planet will evade us, because we are still acting as masters of creation, as if we alone can fix it, and it is not yet a question of healing what we love, of healing our shared world.