

Sunday February 7th, 2021

## **Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Parishioner Reflection**

*By: Edel Reid*

Last week, St. Mark's gospel focused on Jesus' mission as a teacher, with an account of Jesus preaching in the synagogues "with authority" and the crowds reacting with gasping astonishment. This Sunday's gospel follows immediately on from that passage, and relates the miracle of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law and then subsequently many others in the "whole city". Let us consider how this page of holy scripture touches on a few points that everyone can relate to in these times, namely: fever, illness, suffering, healing, restoration of order and normalcy, and renewal of our energy to serve God. This Sunday, Jesus is portrayed as a physician. St. Thomas Aquinas actually calls Jesus our Holy Physician and St. Bridget of Sweden calls Him our Heavenly Physician. In these times of disease – a global pandemic of both physical and (it would appear) emotional and spiritual ills, the portrayal of Jesus the doctor, and a doctor who does "house calls" no less, has special meaning and can bring us supernatural confidence and hope. In this reflection, we are going to focus primarily on the first part of this gospel, namely, the cure of Peter's mother-in-law.

At first glance, the passage gives us a sense of how busy and exhausting a day in Jesus' ministry could be. Scholars regard St. Mark, the evangelist, as a minimalist when it comes to his descriptions of the ministry of Jesus. So when a certain detail is mentioned, we should probably pay great attention. When St. Mark uses phrases like "the whole city was gathered around the door", it literally meant the whole city. And when Simon said to Jesus "Everyone is searching for you", that meant everyone.

Likewise, when we read that the household told Jesus about Peter's mother-in-law's illness "at once" and "He came and took her by the hand", we get the sense that upon hearing the bad news, Jesus immediately took the initiative. Commentators have said that it was not customary in those days for a man to enter a woman's room where she was lying in bed, but Jesus did just that and reached out and "took her by the hand", the way a doctor might when intending to take someone's pulse. Other translations use the word "grasp" her by the hand. Why does St. Mark make a point of telling us this little detail about Jesus "grasping" the patient's hand? St. Jerome has some interesting things to say about that. He points out that in touching the sick woman, Jesus wanted to make it very clear that He was the physical source of the cure. Not only was He able to diagnose the problem, as a physician would, but He was also the actual medicine, as it were, for the disease.

We are not told exactly what the woman's illness was, only that she had a fever. A fever, we know, is not an illness in and of itself; but rather, it is a symptom of an underlying infection. Whatever the illness was, St. Mark does not consider that detail important and perhaps no diagnosis was available at that time. What is important, however, is that after Jesus took her hand and "lifted her up", the woman recovered instantaneously, and was immediately able to go about her daily tasks. I always found this sentence very interesting. After an illness, the patient usually takes it easy since energy levels can remain low. Here, however, there was no delay. Order was immediately restored and the recovered patient's first task was to "serve" the Lord. There seems to be something very psychologically healthy about getting right back to the task at hand.

Some saints have pointed out that many sins can be seen as "fevers"; that is, symptoms of a spiritual illness. St. Jerome in particular, teaches us about the supernatural meaning of this passage. He writes that each of us are stricken by a fever when, for example, we give in to sin. He comments: "Just like a physical fever, spiritual fever can render the soul of the patient, bedridden, unable to work to fulfill our duties, incapable of action".

This miracle, then, in today's Gospel, can point us to a greater reality: Jesus, our Heavenly Physician, not only HAS the cure for our spiritual fevers, He IS the cure.

I would like to mention two additional points that I think are important lessons for us to take from this gospel. The first one is that, just like the members of Peter's mother-in-law's household, we should tell Jesus if we see or know of someone in trouble – physically or spiritually. We can ask Jesus to go see them. If we intercede for the ill person, Jesus will approach them, stretching out his hand – like a Holy Physician – to help the sick soul.

And the second one is that upon learning of this woman's instantaneous and miraculous cure, the whole city showed up at Jesus' door bringing the sick and possessed to him for a cure. The restoration of one person, in the Kingdom of God, inevitably leads to the salvation of many.

So, do we have a fever? Are we lying around waiting for a cure? Do we know someone this could apply to? He is ready to enter where we are - overwhelmed by fevers, unable to fulfill our tasks, too sick to help ourselves or others. With the restrictions on our movements due to the pandemic, we quite literally may be isolated, lying in our homes, needing help, or we may know someone who is. Jesus, our Heavenly Physician, will come into our home, take the initiative, reach out his hand and

take care of us. Yes, the doctor makes house calls. He will not recoil, no matter how raging the fever, how virulent the virus. We have only to ask on our own behalf, or more importantly, on behalf of someone else. We should have confidence that in response to our request, the energy, vitality, and desire to go about our daily tasks and serve the Lord will be restored.