

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

REFLECTION 1:

A GIVER OF HOPE

Sometimes each of us may ask ourselves the question – 'Am I an optimist or a pessimist?' Do I see the glass half-empty or the glass half-full? Well, in today's readings we come across both kinds of people. For instance, Job is featured in the first reading, bemoaning the fact of his existence, 'months of delusion I have assigned to me my eyes will never again see joy'. For Job, his glass is not just half-full, it was once filled to the brim – but then the bottom fell out of Job's world, and his optimism, hope and joy seemed to evaporate. Many of us will identify with such sentiments.

Then in today's Gospel, we meet Peter's mother-in-law, who is sick with fever. Her glass probably seemed half-empty because sickness at that time was associated with sin. You remember how Jesus was asked regarding the man born blind, 'did this man sin or was it his parents who were wrong-doers?' At the very least, this woman's illness rendered her unclean to participate with her family, friends and neighbours. However, the difference between Job and Peter's mother-in-law was that she had people who cared enough about her to get her the help she needed. So, they told Jesus about her. Job, on the other hand, had so called 'friends' who only made his condition worse by trying to fix the blame on someone else for his troubles, 'fretting till twilight falls'.

With these readings, we're invited to consider our own response to the difficulties of life and to examine how we help others cope with their struggles. Are we pessimists with a complaint for every evil in the world, or are we, what I might call 'Givers of Hope'? Maybe this story might help to illustrate the point.

The story is told about this man who sat with his wife Helen on an antique sofa together. The poor fellow was burdened with a sense of hopelessness – problems at work weighed heavily on him, customers were thinning out, bills coming in and the rent in arrears. With advancing years he feared he would not be able to find another job. So, he lit his pipe and then, accidentally spilled some hot ash, which rapidly burned a hole right through the centre of the sofa seat cover. How would Helen react to her treasured antique? Well, we're told, she calmly threaded a needle and stitched a beautiful flower over the charred spot. When her husband looked at the finished work, he realised that in that moment, he could see a summary of their long life together. His heart began to soar. He had married a repairer of broken spirits, a healer of wounds, a woman whose very presence was an antidote to pessimism. He understood, perhaps for the very first time, that it was Helen's deep and abiding trust in God that made it possible for her to be a source of light and a giver of hope in times that might plunge others into darkness and despair.

The good news is that Job's trust in God eventually enabled him to find the hope and courage to endure all his sufferings. Paul in our second reading for today also found such hope in God and in the Gospel, that he couldn't help but preach. And when he did, he made every effort to adapt himself to the needs and circumstances of his listeners, so that they too would find their hope in the good news of salvation. Jesus acted as a giver of hope to those he taught, healed and forgave and in the end he died so that human hope might never be extinguished.

We all burn holes in precious things. We make shreds of our relationships through selfishness and thoughtlessness. We scorch the hearts of one another with angry words, constantly giving out. Whether we dash another's enthusiasm or ridicule their dreams, or quash their hope – we burn holes and the rent grows deeper and wider when we refuse to forgive or even ask for forgiveness. We are free to choose the attitudes with which we will deal with others. As a man friend of mine remarked to me recently 'facts are always friendly' - it's the negative construction we sometimes place on the facts that flaws our relationship with others. We can dwell on the hole and become lost in negativity, or we heal it like Helen, whose trust in God made her a giver of hope to others.

REFLECTION 2: GOOD NEWS FOR ALL

In recent years concerns over the Ebola epidemic in West Africa prompted an urgent search for a vaccine to address the crisis. The world's response to provide better health care systems offers some hope. For people living in the first century Jesus was the miracle vaccine, he was the only hope, the one with the ability to heal. For those who had lived in hopelessness or as Job expressed it in our first reading, 'hired drudgery...never again seeing joy...pressed service' (Job 7: 1-4). To these, Jesus gave hope. No wonder that Mark noted that "The whole town was gathered outside the door and that crowds followed him wherever he went'.

The Gospel for today is comprised of three related but distinct scenes (Mark 1: 29-39). The text describes a typical day in Jesus' missionary efforts on behalf of God's kingdom. The prophets had offered a time of hope and healing as a sign that the messianic era had begun. Jesus had not come as a military leader or even the king that many of his contemporaries had expected. Rather he came as Son of Man, Son of God, with healing and forgiveness for sinners. Mark in his Gospel noted that his disciples or the people did not instantly understand Jesus' messiahship in general. Only in his passion, death and resurrection did they fully comprehend.

Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law in the privacy of her home, away from the excitement and adulation of the crowds. Besides the cure itself, told simply and without drama, the event also includes a lesson in discipleship. Once healed by Jesus the woman got up and offered hospitality to those in her home. So should every disciple respond to Jesus' action in this life with faithful service to all those the Lord places on their path.

After the cures and exorcisms, Jesus rose early the next day to go to a quiet place to pray – so offering his example to all who would follow him. Times of quiet and prayer, away from the demands of the apostolate, enabled the disciples to be in the presence of God, to evaluate, reassess, and focus anew on their direction and goals. From that prayerful interlude, Jesus emerges with a firm resolution to move beyond his home base in Capernaum and minister to all in Galilee. Pope Francis reminds us that Jesus' itinerant ministry continues to challenge and inspire the church to be less institutional but more mobile, and more available and accessible to all.