



Sixth Week in Ordinary Time: 14th/15th February 2021

Reflection / Homily – Mgr Daniel McHugh

“He had to stay outside in places where nobody lived”

On Tuesday this week the topic for discussion at our Deanery Meeting was “Pastoral Ministry to the Sick”. It was led by the Priest who has special responsibilities for the major Hospitals in East Birmingham and Solihull Deanery. It was a very moving and personal account reflecting the challenges of the Pandemic and involvement with patients and staff in hospitals in the past year. I thought of his account again as I read the Gospel of the Mass for the Sixth Sunday, which is about Jesus touching and healing a Leper. This terrible disease, though it is now curable due to modern drugs, is still in existence in parts of the world. At the time of Our Lord, it was a disease that affected the whole community: the person with the disease was considered “unclean” and had to live apart. We are told that Jesus reached out and touched the Leper, and as a result he Himself became an outcast: “He had to stay outside in places where nobody lived” says St Mark.

One of the saddest aspects of the Covid-19 Pandemic has been the way in which people getting the disease have been separated from loved ones, and have even died without seeing them because the disease is so infectious. We have been in admiration of the care and expertise those on the front line have bought at personal risk to those infected, and in intensive care. Tuesday’s Deanery Meeting brought home to us Priests, the role of the Priest on the front line and the importance of the Sacrament of the Sick, the Anointing and Absolution that the Priest brings to those who have been dying in such large numbers. The Priest is able to express personal care, love and understanding to Patients and Staff, but in addition he brings a spiritual healing that takes the person in danger of death or dying into a new life of Grace: He brings the touch of Jesus Himself who healed the Leper in today’s Gospel.

St Paul in the letter to the Corinthians this Sunday speaks of his vocation: “I try to be helpful to everyone at all times, not anxious for my own advantage but the advantage of everybody else, so that they may be saved. Take me for your model, as I take Christ”. Paul’s goal was to bring the Salvation of Christ, and that is the goal of the Priest too, especially in the Pastoral Care of the Sick. Salvation is being saved from sin and death and achieves its ultimate goal in new life with Christ in Heaven.

It was encouraging to hear from the Hospital Chaplain the extent to which his “touch”, the touch of Jesus, has come to be seen in the hospital wards as part of what the Patient needs at this most traumatic time.

For the rest of us, Families, Parishioners, Priests, Deacons, Religious: it has been a time when the restrictions imposed by this infectious disease, have been, and are, frustrating. In terms of the Priest’s role: normal visits to the sick at home with Holy Communion

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each week have been withdrawn, his visits to Hospital restricted, and everyone's visits to elderly relatives and friends forbidden. Thank God for the wonder of technology where we can keep in contact by Skype, FaceTime and many other means. We all look forward though to the time when we can reach out and "touch" once more.

But, what has it meant for those who are cut off, isolated, because they are considered to be a danger to the rest of us, or we are a danger to them. They understand what it means to be an "outcast"! And, in more normal times, when this Pandemic is over or at least under control, will there still be "outcasts": those we do not reach out to because there are not fully part of our communities on the grounds that they are of another race or religion, different sexual orientation, or poor and badly kept. We need to return to the Gospel of this Sunday and ask what Jesus would have done: the Gospel says "Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him."

St Paul says: "take me as your model, as I take Christ". Each of us is challenged by this Sunday's Gospel to play our part in bringing salvation to the world. St Damien of Molokai took the call literally, becoming one of the Lepers in his day. We ask his prayers that we may have something of his compassion for those in need of healing around us in our time.

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