

Homily

October 4/5, 2014

Mass of Anointing

READINGS:

James 5:13-16

Psalm 23

Philippians 4:6-9

Matthew 9:18-30

Our community is dedicating this parish year to the sacramental life-to living sacramentally. This is why we have the banner you see with the symbols of all seven sacraments in our Catholic tradition. The title of a book I recently came across says it all, "The Sacraments: Encountering the Risen Lord" (Paul Feider, author). It says it all because ultimately our faith is an encounter with a living person, Jesus. The kind of encounter Luke describes in his story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Were not our hearts burning inside us as he talked to us on the road..." (Luke24:32) In the first chapter he says beautifully what the meaning of a sacrament is:

"When we journey back to scriptural times, we find that the sacraments began as the early community's attempt to keep alive the *presence* of Jesus whom they loved. It is only after Jesus was physically absent that the community sought to ways to make his presence felt, to keep the awareness of his love alive in their hearts, and to enable others to experience the beauty of a love so strong."(p11) This

morning/afternoon, guided by our Scriptural readings and the Eucharistic sacrifice we are going to experience this powerful love as healing through the anointing which is the principal sign of the sacrament of the sick.

I would like to diverge here and linger a little on the word, 'healing'. At McGill where I am a teacher of young medical students and residents, we try hard to make these young doctors understand the difference between 'curing' someone, and 'healing' someone. 'Curing' is one dimensional-you have a pneumonia, the doctor gives you a prescription for antibiotics and your pneumonia goes away to put it very simplistically. Curing is for the body. But we are more than bodies; we are persons with an inner part we can call 'spirit' or 'soul'. We are in fact 'incarnate spirits' and often our spirit, our inner side needs to be healed. Healing occurs when we address the needs of the whole person, not just the body for in truth, there are many chronic illnesses we cannot 'cure'. Palliative care is an example of medical treatment that extends beyond the body and attempt to bring a person who is dying peace, comfort and resolution. It is often through illness that a person encounters the healing love of the Lord. At every Eucharist we say the wonderful prayer, "Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but *only say the word and my soul shall be healed.*" Here we should understand that the translation of the Hebrew word as 'soul' is misleading because the Hebrew word means the whole person.

Our Gospel, specially chosen for this celebration, gives us a portrait of Jesus the healer. It is this memory of Jesus' love in healing that we encounter in the sacrament of the sick we celebrate as a community today. The sacraments are like icons. An icon is not just a painting in a particular style but in the orthodox community an icon is a window into another reality. It is a window through which we experience the kingdom of God. In today's Gospel, there are three healings. All three show us the intense compassionate love Jesus has for us. Jesus who is God does not want us to suffer; he wants us to experience wholeness and his healing always restores us to wholeness. Jesus' healings are never limited to just the body and Jesus' healing leads to eternal life with his Father; it is only possible through the faith of each of the characters in our Gospel. The unnamed official had faith even when the crowd ridiculed Jesus: "But come, lay your hand on her, and she will live." To the woman with a hemorrhage, Jesus says "Courage daughter! Your faith has saved you." And to the two blind men, "Do you believe that I can do this? Yes Lord...Let it be done for you according to your faith." Jesus' healing brings the peace that comes from knowing that Jesus brings eternal life. If Jesus has the power to heal disease and raise people from the dead, then he has the power to restore us to eternal life with his Father. Many of us question why we have to suffer illness, or why those whom we love must suffer. Often this is a stumbling block for many who are struggling with their faith. Jesus does not answer this question; he does not tell us why we suffer illness and pain and suffering. He only brings compassion and love and healing to those whom he encounters who are suffering. "At the sight of the crowds, his

heart was moved with pity for them...” Jesus went to His own death for our sake feeling abandoned; He didn’t blame God for his suffering and he did not deny God’s existence in the midst of his execution on a cross. Feider in the book I have already mentioned says, “Jesus did not heal everyone as we see in the Scriptures. He must have watched his earthly father die, as well as some of his friends. His ministry of healing love and his message of salvation do proclaim however, that no illness is ultimate, no sickness is final, not even death can withstand the power of God’s eternal love. That message gives us the peace of knowing that he is with us in those mysteries, loving us into wholeness and ultimately eternal life....It gives a deep underlying peace even when we do not understand the meaning of all that is happening.” (Feider,p77)

There are many misconceptions about this sacrament. It has evolved over the centuries. In the early church it was used to help people who were ill as we see described in our first reading: “Are any among you sick? They should call the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.” (James 5:14f). Later, in a misconstrued notion of suffering, the church wandered from the understanding of this sacrament as meant for healing. Suffering was to be endured in repentance for one’s sins and the sacrament meant for the sick became known as Extreme Unction to be given on one’s death bed. Vatican 2 recovered the true meaning of this sacrament and the name was changed from ‘Extreme Unction’ to the original name,

'sacrament of the sick' and it was no longer to be restricted to those dying but to anyone suffering from a chronic illness, a pending surgery or the frailty of old age. For example, Bishop Francis Malooly of Baltimore conferred the sacrament on a 10 year old boy with autism during a mass on the World Day of the Sick in Washington in 2008. The sacrament may be received more than once. The effects of this sacrament are outlined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (#1520 and ff-I encourage you to read). Briefly, the effects are:

1. "strengthening, peace and courage" to deal with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age;
2. It leads to the healing of the soul and if God wills the body;
3. It forgives our sins if we are not able to receive the sacrament of reconciliation;
4. It unites us with Jesus' suffering more closely and we 'participate in the saving work of Christ;'
5. Clearly it is meant for those who are dying and when so administered, it is called the sacrament of those departing.

Momentarily we will be celebrating the sacrament of the sick and anyone suffering from a chronic illness or the weakness of old age may ask for the sacrament.

I will conclude with Father Feider's words:

"I find that the most powerful healings happen when sick people feel totally surrounded in the love of Jesus evidenced by the prayers and concern of the people gathered around them. The reading of God's word,

the laying on of concerned hands, the anointing with blessed oil, and the prayers for healing which are all part of the sacrament of anointing are powerful avenues for Jesus' presence to touch the lives of the sick and restore them to health of body, mind and soul. To all who are soaked in this healing encounter, something always happens."(Feider, 86)

Deacon Richard Haber