

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Presentation)

For a couple of weeks, we've reflected on the experience of worry. Of course, we all have many concerns in our lives that urge us to worry, but in my experience, illness creates one of the greatest sources of worry. I see it all the time in hospitals, in nursing residences and even in people's own homes. The suffering caused by illness isn't limited to the sick either; it's also found, sometimes even more so, in those who care for or love one who is ill; the sufferings of disease affect us all. Age, too, makes no difference; while parents always have concerns for their children, these concerns are at least doubled when a child is sick. Perhaps recent news about the Corona virus has stirred up concerns among some here.

Indeed, we should be concerned by illness. God never planned for his beloved children to get sick or to endure disease and the actions of Jesus, the concern and sadness he has expressed when encountering the sufferings of the sick, reveal to us that these maladies trouble him too. Yet, for some mysterious reason, God allows for illness, it's threats and the great sufferings that accompany it. Perhaps in part, it remains a reminder that we're not yet in heaven, though that's just my guess. While the full reason behind God's allowance of illness remains a mystery, he has, fortunately, given signs revealing that he will not allow disease to have the last say over us.

God has given us the sign of our Church. Many of those who first came to settle Canada long ago in overcrowded ships contracted various diseases during the multi-month voyage. After landing here, the sick who survived the trip were sometimes placed in quarantine so they wouldn't infect others. During their isolation, they were often ministered to by Catholics, religious brothers, sisters and

others who set aside their own fears of disease to nurse the sick and teach them how to survive the wild of Canada. There are many similar stories of Catholics working in leper colonies, AIDS hospitals and disease-ridden slums all over the world; they go into those places despite danger and seemingly insurmountable obstacles not simply to bring comfort to the sick and dying but to let all know that illness, disease and suffering are not signs of God's abandonment.

Closer to home, Fr. Israel and I regularly visit the hospital, seniors' residences and those who can't join us because of illness or age. But our parish also features a dedicated group who also go to those places; I'm sure they would welcome assistance from any willing to serve in this way. Not only does this group bring joy and fellowship to those afflicted with age and infirmity, they also become signs of God's presence in places that can be fairly dark. This is what our Church does: like Mary and John, who followed Jesus as he suffered and carried his cross, we accompany the suffering despite dangers, fears and darkness because we know that is where God is.

I do have concerns that some of the infirmed of our community could be overlooked. The hospital doesn't call us whenever a Catholic arrives at their doors and those unable to join us here because of age or illness aren't always able to tell us of their predicament either. Many here have been wonderful at letting us know when someone is so burdened. But in my short time here, I've also been approached by people wondering why someone in need did not get a visit. Your priests: we aren't always aware of where we're needed. So, leading up to the world day of the sick next week, I ask that you let us know of those who should get a visit, perhaps after asking the infirmed person or one of their family members first,

of course; there are some who fear that a visit from the priest will somehow hasten death.

God has also given us the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. While some posit that a life in suffering isn't worth living, we proclaim that suffering is, in fact, a valuable moment in the life of an individual. We don't celebrate illness, but we do celebrate the fact that, through Jesus, suffering has been transformed from hopelessness into the means for everlasting life; we know God is with the anointed just as surely as he is with a newly baptized child. Today's second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews tells us how Christians even in the earliest days of the Church, knew that God made, "...the source of their salvation perfect through sufferings." (Heb 2:10) Thanks to Jesus, suffering is no longer senseless and dark, but a place where we know God is present.

Some call the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, 'The Last Rites', though that's a horrible name for it. The Anointing of the Sick isn't reserved until death is immanent but is for any who face grave illness. Don't put it off until the last moment not only in case it's difficult to reach a priest but because Sacraments aren't intended for final moments but as sources of strength for a journey. There is no limit to how often a person can receive the Anointing of the Sick and it should be offered once someone is found having an illness that threatens life.

The Sacrament is not for someone with a runny nose or stubbed toe. But anyone diagnosed with cancer or a terminal or degenerative illness, declared palliative, going under general anaesthetic or an induced coma or having to spend more than a few nights in the hospital should be Anointed. A person who has pneumonia or an infection that won't clear up despite treatment should be Anointed. Those tormented by suicidal ideation, struggling to cope with a life

robbing addiction or anything similar should also seek this Sacrament. In short, this is a Sacrament for anyone whose life is threatened by illness or disease, be it physical, mental, emotional or in any other form.

At all Sunday Masses next weekend, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the sick will be offered in this place. Like all Sacraments, the Anointing of the Sick is not a private moment, but something we celebrate as a Church; as sickness affects us all, so too does this Sacrament. Again, we are reminded in today's second reading, "Because Jesus himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." (Heb 2:18) Perhaps some here need to encounter Jesus in the Sacrament: next weekend you'll be invited to come forward to receive it. Perhaps you know of someone who needs the strength and healing Jesus offers in this Sacrament: please invite them. There will be no questions and no one will be expected to reveal or share anything.

In this life, we may never know why God allows people, even the innocent and children, to suffer through illness, sickness and disease. That's okay; one day it will all be made clear and our suffering will seem like nothing when compared to the eternal joy of heaven. In the meantime, we have the comfort and hope offered through the members of our Church who bring God's love to the sick as well as the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick that transforms illness from a source of despair into the presence of Our Lord. To our Great Physician, let us offer a prayer.

God of all, many of your beloved people suffer through illness, ailment and disease that threatens life and empowers despair. May they receive hope, strength and courage through the members of your Church and may we see in them, not suffering and darkness but the presence of Your Son who conquered suffering by making it the means for eternal life. We offer this prayer in His name. Amen.