

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

“This Long Disease...”

...my life.” So Alexander Pope spoke of his existence, helped through it as he was by his faithful servant, John. I’ve met a lot of people who belittle or deny their awareness of suffering; but I’ve believed very few of them. Our nature is subject to the vagaries of illness, and simple things like an upset stomach can rob us comprehensively of our well-being, and speak to us of our terminal vulnerability.

The Urge To Deny

To take refuge in denial is an escape-hatch for many of us. *Pretend these messages aren’t coming*, we say, *and they’ll go away*. This is the more likely to happen, the graver the message; what we can’t help must be ignored. The fear is that our life is travelling inexorably down a dead end, and we don’t want to watch. This is no new thing; and the tendency to isolate the sick and disabled, so that the rest of the troops don’t get discouraged, is fully present in the Bible, with the awesome figure of the leper its saddest victim.

The Gathering of the Sick

Jesus is the shepherd of the lost; from the beginning Mark shows his compassion for the incurable; so, in today’s Gospel we see a dramatic scene, as the sun sets on the Sabbath, of the land coming quietly to life. Under the slanting rays come figures bearing heavy burdens, the unwonted movement of the paralysed, the assembling of the possessed; *the whole town*, says Mark, *crowding round his door*. I think this scene is enough to make us think deeply about Jesus and about our belonging to him. Even before we hear any individual story of healing, the simple fact that the whole town - sick as well as sound - gathers at his door should inspire us to a new understanding of his work for us, and our following of him. It is as if he says to us: *There is no need to flee from your sorrows, there is nothing in you that is past cure. There is no-one who is too far gone to be rescued*. Here is the primary impact that Jesus had on people: he made them *hope*. There is in this hopefulness an antidote to the awful depression represented by Job in the first reading today. I think Job’s poem is intensely modern; he is expressing the anguish of a humanity that is enslaved by routine, by the fruitlessness of labour, the pointlessness of daily effort. It is the business of staying alive; but it

whispers to us of death, that sweeps away all our efforts to live.

He Healed Many...

...but Jesus does not appear to heal *all*. There are ills that are suffered in a hopelessness that seems unreached by any ray of redemption. In the same way, Jesus is asked the next morning to come back into the town because “everyone is looking for you”; his response is to leave the district and go to other towns *preaching* - “because that is why I came”. It is as if the *hope* is worth more than the fulfilment that healing brings. It occurs to me that all those he healed on that day in Galilee have been dust and ashes for two millennia; I wonder if they recalled, when their natural weakness finally caught up with them, the man who lifted them up from an earlier plight, and if they suffered their final illnesses differently, not because of their healing (which was temporary) but because of the hope that took root in them when they were liberated. Perhaps, after all, the *preaching* was of longer significance than the healing, and the word outlasted the deeds.

The Word Of God Endures Forever

This may give us something to think about: we are always so sure that deeds speak louder than words, that we begin to think we can do without words as long as the deeds are there. Jesus doesn’t set out to the other towns to heal, but to preach; and as we travel through the Gospel of Mark, we will find the same primacy of preaching over healing in other places too. *In the beginning* - before we were even created - *was the Word*; the power of the word to mediate God will always precede, illuminate, and frame the value of signs. That is why the Old Testament’s faith, which is the sharing of promises and the keeping of the Covenant, is so powerful for us: it sets the scene for the moment when - in so many tremendous ways - the Word becomes flesh, and we can see and receive him, and truly become children of God. Our suffering tells us we need him. His preaching to us comes in response to our need, *Fr Philip*