

## HOMILY SUN 5B 5 FEB 2012 HT-W/XII-PC

I like this Gospel passage for perhaps an unusual reason. We hear that a bunch of people want to see Jesus, but the good Lord gives them the slip. The story relates that after a long night of healing and exorcizing, the Lord snuck away under cover of darkness to a secret place for prayer. He gave no one, not even the apostles, any clue to his whereabouts. Much later when Peter and his companions finally tracked Jesus down and told him that everyone was looking for him, the Lord tersely said it was time to move on to the neighboring villages and preach the gospel there--no apologies, no adjustments in the itinerary. The simple fact was that preaching the good news was the main reason Jesus had come, so anything else just had to be dispensed with. I like this gospel because it shows that the gentle, compassionate, solicitous Lord Jesus was not always and everywhere available to everybody in his human nature. So that must make it ok for Fr. to get away too. Nowadays, every now and then, I fear that a few of the laity expect priests to be available 24/7/365. This expectation persists despite the precipitous decline in the number of priests in this corner of the world in recent decades. To be honest, this expectation was never realistic, not even in the 'good old days' when the ratio of parishioners to priest was much smaller. If the good Lord required down time, even being infallible, impeccable, and having a divine nature, how much more limited must be the availability of the weak, imperfect men who exercise the sacred ministry in his stead. Priests need time away to pray, to study, to rest & recreate, so that when they engage people in ministry, they actually have something to give--be it wise counsel, a well-prepared homily, a reverent liturgy, or simply an attentive ear.

Another aspect of this selection that is most instructive is the relationship it illustrates between two facets of Jesus' ministry: namely, the preaching of the gospel and the works of healing. The Lord grants a kind of priority to preaching vis-a-vis the cures and exorcisms. The miracles of healing, being extraordinary, seem to be the main attraction for the throngs who crowd about the Lord. But Jesus tells his disciples that the reason he has come is to preach the gospel, making no mention of the miracles. The miracles of healing are important--they validate the truth of what the Lord is saying--his words are backed up by his actions. The healings also illustrate the substance of his message. Jesus preaches the advent of the kingdom of God where the power of sin and death will be definitively shattered. Since illness is part of the sad legacy of sin, since we believe that death and illness entered creation through sin and are somehow associated with Satan's sway over this fallen world, cures show that God's Spirit is at work in Jesus and is breaking the devil's stranglehold on the human race. The miracles of healing disclose the compassion of God for his people, they reveal a deity who binds up all that is broken, who salves every wound. However, the final goal of the Lord's ministry is not to restore people to natural health so that they can live to a ripe old age free of aches and pains. The Lord has a gift that is far more precious for those who believe. The Lord comes to make the kingdom of God tangible even in this world, and to grant human beings the opportunity to share in that kingdom forever; and being in that kingdom means perfect peace and joy without end--something infinitely more

blessed than a comfortable suburban lifestyle. Getting this good news across to people and persuading them to believe it is what Jesus is ultimately about. And so when he had preached the message in Capernaum, his work there was effectively done; so then he went to the neighboring villages to continue doing the same.

Our Church tries to continue this mission of the Lord. Unlike Jesus, we don't have the divine power to perform miraculous cures, even if here and there at places like Lourdes he continues to grant extraordinary healings on occasion. And so we spend a lot of time and energy caring for the sick. Hospitals and hospices have been part of the Church's mission since ancient times; in fact, the earliest hospitals were faith-based--long before the government ever worried about the sick, the Church heeded the call to exercise the corporal works of mercy, to care for Christ suffering in the sick and dying among us. Even where the Church cannot care for the ill in institutional settings, laity, religious, and priests often bring the compassionate touch of Christ to the suffering by their visits as caregivers and sacramental ministers. In this manner, we show our ailing brethren that the Gospel is true: that is, God does love and care about them, he is with them even along the most difficult turns in life's path, and he does await them beyond death's door in Paradise.

Our works of charity are subordinated to the proclamation of the gospel. Both require the other, but ultimately the gospel promise is a promise that exceeds any compassionate care human hands can communicate. Eternal life, peace, and joy can at best be briefly tasted in this life. To communicate the gospel, to preach the good news, and to move hearts to faith in God's Word, is our overriding mission as a Church. One direct corollary is that the care provided by Catholic persons and Catholic institutions must never contradict the Gospel. And so practices like abortion, sterilization, contraception, assisted suicide, and euthanasia are definitively excluded, even though in this post-Christian climate they have wormed their way into the practice of non-Catholic physicians and facilities.

One of the ancient names for the Eucharist is the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death. The idea is not simply that in Holy Communion the Lord grants life beyond the grave, but rather he enables an entirely different way of living before the grave, a manner of life that is blessed by the peace and joy of knowing that we are loved by God. We who must walk in the valley of the shadow of death are guided in our paths by Christ, the glorious light from on high who has shown upon us. May this Eucharist rekindle the flame of faith in our hearts, that we may shine more brightly as the light of the world.