

## 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time

A few minutes before mass several years ago, in another parish, on this Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year B, the lector assigned to the first reading turned to me in the sacristy and smiled. She said, "Oh, Father, isn't today's first reading beautiful?" I smiled back, but I thought, "You can't be serious." It's like the most depressing first reading we ever hear at Sunday mass. It opens with Job saying, "Isn't life on earth a drudgery?" And it closes with him saying, "I shall not see happiness again." I learned later that my lector that day suffered clinical depression, and for her, that reading completely expressed what she was feeling. She found comfort that someone else understood what she was experiencing, even though that person lived thousands of years ago.

Everyone goes through times of sorrow. A physical infirmity affecting your ability to walk, the realization that a bad decision you made has hurt people you love, a spiritual question that deepens before it gets resolved - any of these events can change a person's outlook on life for the worse. Any normally happy person may go through a stretch when life on earth is a drudgery.

Believers expect God to do something about it. After all, in a passage like today's gospel, Jesus lifts up the mother-in-law of Simon Peter. He cures many others sick with various diseases. He drives out demons. And when more people start looking for him, he goes to other towns to work the same wonders.

Sandwiched between a first reading of despair and a gospel of healing, Psalm 147 invites us to sing, "Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted." It's a line that inspired what you frequently hear near the beginning of mass: "Lord Jesus, you came to heal the contrite of heart." Psalm 147 looks back on the glorious period when Israel's captivity in Babylon came to an end, and those who were scattered from their homeland returned. It says, "The Lord builds up Jerusalem and brings back Israel's exiles; he heals the brokenhearted; he binds up all their wounds.... The Lord lifts up the lowly." After many long years, God finally heard Israel's prayer. The cause of Israel's depression was manifold, but especially the loss of their homes. With that came broken hearts. Psalm 147 reflects not so much the physical healing Jesus worked in the gospel, but the emotional healing so pitifully absent from today's first reading.

People undergoing depression often benefit from counseling or group interaction, but they may also discover that depression is rooted in something physical, an imbalance that the right medicines can improve. For any of us going through a time of sorrow, things that normally bring us joy do not, so we tend to avoid them. Yet many professionals advise otherwise: Do the things that normally feel good even when they don't. Instead of feeling happy and therefore behaving happy, behave happy in order to feel happy. God can offer healing in this way. It can start with the simple realization that you are not the only one who feels the way you do. Others have gone through it. Many became better because of it.

And whenever we arrive at a better place than we were in the past, the time has come to pray Psalm 147. When the mercy of God overcomes whatever pulls us down, we owe God this prayer: "Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted."

Sunday, February 4, 2018