



Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland

Bishop Emeritus

Catholic Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Homily

Mass Featuring Anointing of the Sick

A Ministry of the Order of Malta

Cure of Ars Parish - Leawood, Kansas

March 6, 2010

A long, long time ago, indeed, a very long time ago. So long ago, in fact, it was during the last century when I was a young priest. I attended the funeral of a well-known and esteemed pastor of the Archdiocese of Washington and the eulogy was delivered by the well-known and esteemed Bishop Fulton Sheen, remembered by all of us as the Catholic TV evangelist *par excellence* whose weekly show, "Life is Worth Living," received better ratings than the famous Milton Berle. When he accepted his Emmy Award in 1952 Bishop Sheen explained his success by maintaining that he had the better writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John!

I hope you are familiar with these four writers because they have a lot to do with why we are here today. After reporting that Jesus had publicly adopted the messianic prediction of Isaias as the theme for his life's work, they generously documented the fulfillment of his promise especially as it related to his role as a healer. Some instantaneous cures are described in detail but few of the beneficiaries are named: the cure of a man born blind, that of a crippled woman, a man with dropsy (we're not sure what that was), a deaf man, Peter's mother-in-law, ten lepers, a woman suffering from constant hemorrhaging and so on.

News of these positive manifestations of his power spread like wildfire across the countryside and the expectations of the people grew to such an extent that his arrival in a new locality prompted processions of the sick and the handicapped to his door. Matthew cannot conceal his excitement:

"Jesus went on from there and reached the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and he went up into the hills. He sat there, and large crowds came to him bringing the lame, the crippled, the blind, the dumb and many others: these they put down at his feet, and he cured them. The crowds were astonished to see the dumb speaking, the cripples whole again, the lame walking and the blind with their sight, and they praised the God of Israel." (Matt 15:29-31)

Mark is no less enthusiastic. On one occasion when Jesus had completed the short lake crossing of the Sea of Galilee, he describes the frenzy which greeted his arrival.

"No sooner had they stepped out of the boat than people recognized him, and started hurrying all through the countryside and brought the sick on stretchers to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, to village, or town, or farm they laid down the sick in open spaces, begging him to let them touch even the fringe of his cloak. And all those who touched him were cured". (Mark 6:53-56)

Maybe it was then that Jesus realized that his apostles could be his presence in many places at the same time in proclaiming the kingdom. So he *"empowered them to do precisely what he was doing: to preach, to heal, to exorcise – the signs of the advent of the Kingdom of God."* (THE FOUR GOSPLES,

Bruce Vawter, C.M. Vol. 1, p. 245) And Mark tells us, that in doing so, they anointed the sick people with oil (Mark 6:12-13), surely a precedent for the sacrament many of you will receive at this Mass today.

It doesn't take too much imagination to realize that James was one of the Twelve who used oil and prayer to seek consolation for the sick as he extended the ministry of the healing Christ to the suffering and the dispirited of Palestine. I am sure there were times when his prayers seemed to work: there were times when they didn't, but, not knowing the interior dispositions of the ailing person and certainly not knowing the multiple forms of God's compassion, he could only wonder and marvel at the incomprehensible kindness of divine mercy. Scripture scholars still debate whether it was this same disciple, James, the son of Alphaeus, who later penned the words which described the anointing of the sick as practiced in the apostolic church. The existence of the author's testimony is more important than his actual identity insofar as we are assured that Christ the healer still lives among us sacramentally just as his death on Calvary was vanquished by his resurrection from the tomb. More a sermon than a letter, the author, James, is not shy when it comes to giving advice and here's what he tells those who are sick;

"If one of you is ill, he should send for the priests of the church, and they must anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up again and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven." (James 5:14-15)

Your priests, filling the shoes of the apostles, will walk among you this hour and they will anoint you with oil and they will pray over you. And the Christ of Galilee, Eucharistically present to be your sustenance and to give you his blessing will listen to your prayers and, make no mistake about it, he will answer them perhaps not always in the way that we may desire, but he will answer them in a way which is reflective of his love and compassion allied to his guarantee, that even in your pain you will be aware of his unseen presence. You will never walk alone. He understands our suffering because he too suffered. Let us remember that despite the intensity of his pain and sense of abandonment on the path to Calvary, he still welcomed others to share in this ultimate redemptive act - a Simon to help carry his cross, a Veronica to wipe the blood from his forehead, a thief who expressed his pity, a centurion who testified that this was a good man and above all others, a mother overwhelmed by a sorrow beyond human comprehension. A tiny cameo role in his suffering may be our guarantee of a share in his resurrection.

I found this same sentiment in a story Mother Teresa told about the courage and the faith of a young man with AIDS. He beckoned her to his bedside and this is what he confided to her.

"When I can hardly stand my headaches, I share it with the pain that Jesus must have suffered because of the crown of thorns. When the pain moves to my back, I share it with the pain Jesus must have felt when the soldiers gave him the lashes. When my hands hurt, I share that pain with the pain Jesus felt when he was crucified."

Our faith is a celebration of life. *"I have come,"* the Lord reassures us, *"that you may have life and have it more abundantly."* As Christians we are destined for eternity and although the journey may be rough at times there is no doubt about our destination. You may recall that on one occasion St. Paul's cry for personal healing was seemingly denied but he was given an even greater gift when the Lord convinced him that his grace was sufficient for him and that God's power was made perfect in weakness. If, as some writers have called it, life is an unfinished symphony, then what we experience from birth to death is merely the tune-up period with its share of discordant notes, all to be rectified before the real music begins. There is an old Irish prayer which recognizes the reality and the beauty of this life while accepting the inevitability of its eventual demise. Like a number of Irish prayers it seeks to straddle time and eternity. It is short and sweet and to the point! I recommend it highly. "May the good Lord take a liking to you, but not too soon"

☩ AMEN ☩