

Twenty Third Sunday of the Year

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In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This week I took great pleasure from listening to the BBC programme “Beyond Belief”. An Oxford don well known to this church got into a very interesting discussion about the religious content of the Harry Potter books with two other scholars. A debate arose over whether or not Harry Potter can be read as a sacred text. I won’t spoil it for you, but an interesting question came up: how we immerse ourselves in texts, and derive richer meaning from them.

For biblical passages such as gospel readings, commentaries can be very helpful for historical and literary context. But there are also practices that invite the participation of the holy spirit and your own imagination. The major monastic traditions of the west engage in *Lectio Divina*, or divine reading: you read a short passage out loud, then pause and allow a significant word or phrase to emerge, then repeat the process.

There is also Ignatian spiritual reading, or imaginative contemplation; and in this practice, you imagine that you yourself are in the story, asking what you feel, see, smell, and understand.

Both practices bring about a much richer engagement with the text, and can start to help us understand how bystanders, including the disciples, might have experienced the event; and also how the intended audience for the recorded gospel accounts would have understood them.

Today’s readings are all tied together by God giving healing as liberation. But for a first-century reader, healing, and its originating problem, sickness and disease, were understood differently than they are today.

In John 9, the disciples ask Jesus to explain the cause of a man's blindness. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus replies that it is neither. He connects the man's disability, and then its healing, with a revelation of God's work in that person.

In the ancient world, illness and disability were often seen as demonically-originated, or as some kind of punishment, and people who suffered this way had a very difficult time in society -- unsurprisingly, since little effort was made to accommodate their different needs. We see personhood more complexly now, and we have a better sense of our obligation to make our world accessible; and the Christian understanding of disability and illness does not exclude the afflicted from grace. All are equally whole and valued. To us, the idea that illness and suffering are punishment, or the action of a capricious God, is unreasonable. We understand that suffering occurs in a fallen and dysfunctional world, where pain is part of the landscape; but we would not see illness and assume guilt.

You would never dream of telling a friend struck down by Covid that it must be the result of her own sin. But when bad things happen to us, it can be strangely tempting to think this way. A theologian friend of mine has Multiple Sclerosis, putting him in a wheelchair in his early forties. He wrote an article about how we, as Christians, should receive life-changing bad news, reflecting how tempting it is, despite our supposed enlightenment, to harbour dangerous thoughts that it might after all be our own fault; that God has decided to punish us, or visit suffering on us for some mysterious reason.

Certainly, illness, disease, and injury come with loss of some kind. But it is important to distinguish between loss and diminishment. A person might have lost physical abilities because of an illness, but they are in no way diminished as a person whom God loves. My friend writes that he is a complete person *with* and *despite* the difficulties of MS. He said to me that he feels "at peace" with the situation. He would not have chosen it, but he has adapted.

All lives come with loss of some kind; by the end of our lives, we are quite different to how we started out. One interesting question is about the resurrection. If we believe

that our physical bodies will be resurrected, which version will we get? There is an argument that we will not inhabit some perfect smooth version of ourselves, but, instead, our changed and imperfect bodies, so that we can recognize each other.

So, if the state in which I will be resurrected is pre-ordained but not necessarily known to me now, will I recognise *myself*? Which version of your body would you choose to have in heaven? Which version of your mind?

I can only speak from my own limited experience of injury and trauma, and ask myself if I would want the body that has given birth to two children. I think I *would* choose it, because it bears certain mental and physical scars of experiences that cannot now be separated from who I have become. But this is a privilege; I would no doubt feel differently if my relatively small injury were something different and more difficult -- maybe the result of a car accident or a major illness. I am, thanks to the grace of God, at peace in this present version of myself. I was not at peace at first; but then I got used to the body and mind that experienced those things. Being at peace is not an instant achievement; being at peace is connected with healing; and healing takes time. The healing in the gospel accounts is often quick; but it is associated with Jesus doing signs during his short ministry; showing his identity through miracles. It is rare that we see a private healing like the one we heard about today. And even in this case, the man cannot help but go and shout about it. More often, in our own lives, healing happens slowly.

Sometimes healing is not complete, no matter how much praying or trusting we do, and then we must remember that there is a difference between being cured and being whole. We are always whole in the eyes of God, always valued, always loved. And whatever form we take in the afterlife, we will be at peace.

One of the two sacraments of healing is the anointing of the sick. This is sometimes called “last rites” because it is often done at the bedsides of the dying. This can have the unexpected result of the person getting better, but of course, whether the person dies or not, it is only ever first aid. We are all heading towards death, and through death, to resurrection — leaving behind this fallen and deficient world to join God in

perfect peace. And so the priest leaves it up to God to know what kind of healing each person needs.

In a few minutes we will exchange the peace with one another without shaking hands, because our imperfect world is literally diseased. But even if it's just with a nod or a smile, we can greet each other with the intention "peace be with you", knowing that being at peace will look different for each of us, and that God knows what particular healing we need. Let us trust him, and give thanks to him for this peace, a sign of his profound love.