

The Fifth Sunday of the Year

And immediately Jesus left the synagogue, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever, and immediately they told him of her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her; and she served them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together about the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him followed him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also; for that is why I came out." And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. (St Mark 1:29-39)

In my teaching days I had a colleague who had a PhD in Chemistry. He told me once that he made the mistake of allowing BT to list him in the telephone directory as Doctor So-and-so. The mistake came from the fact that people would ring him up and think that he was a medical doctor and would want him to cure them of their various complaints or offer them his advice.

In today's gospel, Jesus finds himself in a similar predicament. Jesus came as saviour of the world. The prophet Isaiah had said of him that by his bruises we are healed and made whole (Isaiah 53:4). True to type, in the synagogue he heals a man with an unclean spirit. From the synagogue he goes to Peter's house and heals his mother-in-law who has a fever. **"That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons.... And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons"** (Mark 1:32-34). Then, very early in the morning he escapes to a quiet spot to pray. Before he could finish his morning prayers his disciples hunt him down and inform him that an even larger crowd has gathered with their sick and infirm and that everyone is looking for him. You would expect Jesus to say, "Great, now we are in business. Now they are coming. Our strategy is working." But what does he say? He says no, **"Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do"** (Mark 1:38).

Excuse me! Proclaim the message? What message is greater than healing the sick and restoring to them their human dignity that has been disfigured by sickness and poverty? Isn't that essentially what Jesus came for? Well, not exactly. Jesus came to bring good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). This good news is spiritual and material just as the human person is soul and body. But when it comes to order of priority, the spiritual comes first, then the material. This order is brought out in Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: **"Seek you first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"** (Matthew 6:33).

What Jesus came to do, in other words is to proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God, to invite all mankind to let God reign as king in their hearts and in their lives, to reconcile us with God and with one another. He came to defeat the state of disharmony or sin that separates us from God and from one another. He came to deal with this root cause of all our problems. As a result we find ourselves in a position to receive God's abundant blessings in all areas of our lives, spiritual as well as physical, moral as well as material, social as well as psychological. But to try to seek physical healing and material well-being without first making peace with God is to miss the point. It is putting the cart before the horse. It does not work. This is probably what the people of Capernaum tried to do with Jesus that morning. So Jesus boycotts them and continues to other cities of Galilee to proclaim the message.

The big crowd that came looking for Jesus that morning went home disappointed. They did not find him. Why? Because they were looking for him for the wrong reasons. They were looking for Jesus simply to get what they wanted; they were not interested in what Jesus came to give. Not that Jesus is not interested in our material welfare. He is. But the spiritual must come first. Like the people of Capernaum we come, in normal times, to church on Sunday looking for Jesus. We come with our various problems of soul and body. To avoid disappointment the first thing we need to do is to forget our personal problems and seek the kingdom of God that Jesus came to proclaim. When we find the kingdom of God then God Himself will see to all our other needs of soul and body.

Almighty God, you have created the heavens and the earth and made us in your own image:
teach us to discern your hand in all your works and your likeness in all your children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns supreme over all things,
now and for ever. Amen.