5 B 2024

By the time of day was over, Simon’s mother-in-law might have wished she had stayed in bed with the fever. She had felt so fine when Jesus gently raised her that she sat everyone down and fed them. But then the Sabbath ended with sundown, and the whole town came crowding round the door, tracking in every kind of sickness and misery.

Care of the sick and infirm reminds us most visibly of how God deals with us graciously in our weakness. There is the tendency in all of us to stand tall and proud, attractive in strength and talent. We even rely on those things and think of those things as important to our relationships with others.

This is not to say that the brightness and smart wit of the beautiful people are not pleasing to God. And so, we need a reminder that God does not glory in our accomplishments. God loves us for who we are—fragile and failing human beings—bent for another kind of glory where the accomplishment is God’s and ours is the gratitude.

The Incarnation is the reminder: God’s self-revelation, becoming like us in all things, but sin; the reminder that the immaterial, eternal God can and has become present in the material, finite world, infused with the goodness of God’s creative power, and holds the potential of God’s presence. The Gospels portray Jesus, who enters the world of the sick and suffering, with healing touches and with healing words.

The charism of our Rule and Life is to live the Gospel, to witness the love that came in Jesus, the love that redeems and lifts up in the humility of the cross. Living the Gospel unites us in our shared desire to experience, reflect upon, and live as Jesus lived. This giving, sensitive God is mirrored in our actions, in caring for the sick, especially those of our fraternities. We were created to be in Christ’s image, not Him in ours.

Franciscan spirituality focuses our identity on the individual, not on our common nature. John Duns Scotus teaches that we are more than just sharers in a common nature, but actually created to be particular being, focusing on the individuality of every being rather than the species.

In today’s readings, we hear what life is like from Job’s point of view: misery, drudgery filled with resentment and longing; St Paul telling the churches they are entrusted with the good news, sharing its blessings with gratitude and speaking about empathy. He resolves to let the actual condition of others to touch him personally, in order to deal with them realistically, himself feeling at times weak and resentful. A similar challenge awaits us. “Be merciful as God is merciful.”

Was it any different with Jesus? Today’s Gospel pictures Him literally surrounded by the sick. What does this demanding, draining, depressing vision of the sick do to Him? After His day of healing, Jesus goes off alone to pray. Jesus, the perfect “lesser brother,” does not let the doing of mercy extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion. Prayer allows us to draw back from what pre-occupies us right now, and see the larger picture, how God sees things.

And yet, when His disciples come looking for Him, He promptly sets off on another round of caring. We may burn ourselves out, but we can keep moving on, sustained with the assurance that God cares.

