

FR. FRANCIS MAPLE – PANTASAPH FRIARY, HOLYWELL, N. WALES

DOES GOD CARE?

Mk. 1:40-45

When people see our world lurching from one disaster to another and when some people suffer crisis after crisis a question they ask is, “Does God care about our world and does He care for me?”

This, I think, was the question dogging the man in our Gospel story. He was a victim of leprosy. That meant two things: one he lived as a social outcast, and two, he would die a slow gruesome death. Then one day he met Jesus. He must have heard about Him. It is interesting the way He approached Jesus. He said, “If You want to, You can cure me.” He believed that Jesus could cure him, but he didn’t know whether He would. You could say that many people think along those lines. They believe in a God of power, a God who controls the universe, but they wonder if He cares enough to notice the plight they are sometimes in and if He cares for them as individuals.

I can understand where people are coming from when they say it is hard to believe in a God who cares. There are lots of things that happen to indicate this. Natural disasters can claim the lives of thousands. We live in a world that is filled with disease, poverty, war, hurt, hatred and heartaches of every conceivable kind. If we were polytheists, believing in many gods, then we could attribute the good to particular gods and the bad to other ones. When, however, we accept the Christian concept of one God, all-powerful, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, then we begin to wonder if He cares. How can He allow dreadful things to happen to our world and us? Either we may stop believing in the goodness of God, or, lose faith in our own self-worth, believing we don’t matter. For some people it is not easy to keep believing in God Who cares.

Let’s go back to our leper. The story tells us that Jesus felt sorry for the man and healed him. Of course, not all of life’s tragedies have this same kind of happy ending. Sometimes don’t we wish they did? It is easy to believe that Jesus cared about this leper because He healed him. What about the many other lepers in His day He did not cure? Are we to conclude that He did not care for them?

Deep down we know He does care. To argue that the presence of evil and suffering is automatic positive proof that there is no God, or at least no God who cares, is rather a simplistic attitude towards life. How do we explain the fact that what we call tragedy often plays a positive role in people’s lives? When we complain about the difficult and painful elements of life, what are we asking for? Is it a world that is all ease and pleasure – is that what we want?

There are times when we would welcome that. We get fed up with trouble and our problems. We want them to go away and never return. Yet, if we were offered streets paved with gold, money growing on trees, a life of ease and idleness I don’t think that would satisfy us. We could take that life for a short time, but we would soon get fed up with it. We are made to face and overcome challenges. If there are no questions that need answering, no problems to solve, no challenges to meet,

nothing hard to undertake or difficult to do, I think many of us would very soon be sick of that kind of world. Everything most worthwhile in our lives has come out of a background of struggle against obstacles. We groan and complain under the frustrations and injustices of living, but we know that life on a silver platter with easy solutions to all our problems would really not be life at all. It is these very hardships faced with determination that form our character and make men and women of us. In human life parents know that growing up is not easy, but when their children face up to the obstacles of life and deal with them successfully, they are truly proud of them and know they have brought them up well.

Perhaps we need to take a new look at our understanding of God. There was more than one leper in Palestine. If Christ could heal one, why didn't He heal them all? The answer to that question lies in our understanding of God. To believe that God is all powerful does not necessarily mean that He will manipulate things and people as He pleases. He cannot do with us what He wants to do if we stubbornly resist Him. He has to take into account the element of free will He has given us, and He respects that. When we see how involved He is with our pain and our troubles by sending His Son to suffer and die for us, then we see that He is not removed from us and that He deeply cares.

Lord Jesus, the answer to suffering in our world and in our lives is to be found in Your suffering and death. If we can understand why You got involved in our world and in our lives then I think it will help us to understand the mystery of suffering and believe in a God who really cares.

BELIEVING IN A GOD WHO CARES

Mk. 1:40-45

For a moment try to put yourself in the shoes of this poor man in today's Gospel. He was a victim of leprosy. That meant two things: one, he lived as a social outcast, he could not live with his family, nor worship in the synagogue, nor work in the community. He had to live in a hovel with other lepers. And two, he would die a gradual and gruesome death.

Then one day he met Jesus and he wondered whether He would cure him. Surely, he must have been desperate, but his approach to Jesus indicates he was not demanding? Almost apologetically he says to Jesus, "If you will, you can make me clean." Was Jesus willing to cure him? Was he unsure of Jesus' healing powers? In that perplexity the leper is not alone. Many people grapple with that same doubt in their own little worlds. They still believe in a God of power, a God who controls the universe, they just wonder if He cares enough to notice - let alone help with their own individual lives.

Sadly, there are some people who are of the opinion that they have ample proof that God does not care. They will point out the many disasters that take place every year somewhere in our world, like famines, wars, disease, murders, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods just to mention a few. Surely if He did care He would not allow such terrible disasters to take place? Was the attitude of the leper along these same

lines, "Jesus, You know what I am suffering? Here am I languishing in my own private little hell, but do You care enough to cure me?"

The story says that Jesus looked on the man with compassion, and subsequently healed him. Jesus even went so far as to touch the leper. This was never done. Of course, not all of life's tragedies have this same kind of happy ending. It is easy to believe that Jesus cared about this leper because He healed him. But what about the other lepers in Palestine who were never healed? Are we to conclude that Jesus did not care about them? Yes, deep down we know Jesus loved them and He cared for them, but why did He not heal them, we could ask?

To argue that the presence of evil and suffering is sure proof that God does not care is a rather simplistic attitude towards life. How do we explain the fact that what we call a tragedy often times plays a positive roll for good in people's lives? When we complain against the difficult and painful elements of life, what are we asking for? A world that is all ease and pleasure - is that what we want?

There are times when we would welcome that for there seems to be too much suffering in our world. We have seen too many tragedies that crush the lives of people with no perceivable good consequences. Yet, if we were offered a perfect world with streets paved with gold, nothing but ease, comfort and idleness I think we would run from that kind of world. If there were no questions that needed answering, no problems that needed solving, no challenges to meet, nothing hard to undertake or difficult to do, we would be sick of that kind of world very soon.

Many parents know they have been successful in bringing up their children when they see them facing up to challenges and crises the world throws at them. In fact, everything most worthwhile in our lives has come out of a background of struggle against obstacles. Yes, we do moan under the frustrations and injustices of living, yet we know that life on a silver platter with easy solutions to all of our problems would really not be life at all. It would make of us something less than real men and women. We would turn out to be nothing but spoilt pampered children.

In the face of suffering if anyone cries out, "Lord, do you care enough about my suffering?" I would ask them to answer these questions, "Why did Jesus become a man?" "Why did He go through that brutal scourging and nailing to a cross?" The simple answer would be because He cares for each one of us.

What we must remember that at times of great suffering like the famines that keep occurring in Africa, when we cry out and say does God care, we should also ask the more important question do we care? God certainly cares for He is a loving God who does not want to see any of His children dying of starvation. He has given all those in prosperous countries, who are not starving, the means of helping the starving children. There is enough food in this world to be stored that when famines do occur these starving children can be fed. God cares because He has given us the knowledge and expertise to cater should these disasters arise. Instead, is it true to say that it is we who do not care? For we over feed ourselves, waste food and never use the foresight God has given us to help His suffering children and our brothers and sisters.

Lord Jesus, whenever we ask the question, “Does God care?” let us look at the cross and meditate on what You our Saviour and Brother suffered and died for us and it will tell us God most certainly cares for each one of us.

SIN IS WORSE THAN LEPROSY

Lev. 13:1-2, 44-46; 1Cor. 10:31-11:1 & Mk.1:40-45

Stories are an important means of communicating the truth. Now a story can be understood at two levels: first of all, at the literal level it means exactly what it says, and it needs no interpretation, its meaning is fairly obvious. However, a story may also speak to us at a deeper symbolic level. Here, we are inspired to unpack the different layers of meaning that lie hidden beneath the symbols. Indeed, the stories in the Bible are very often like that, as in today’s Gospel story about the leper. God’s word is like a gold mine which can never be exhausted, and the Holy Spirit enables us to keep plumbing its depths.

On a literal level, today’s Gospel story demonstrates Jesus healing power over human illnesses. Until recently, leprosy was a disease which was much dreaded by society. It was a debilitating skin condition which left the person ulcer-ridden, foul-smelling and even disfigured. Moreover, the fact that it was contagious meant that the person had to be kept away from society, so that others would not come into contact with him. As we heard in the first reading, the Old Testament Law had strict provisions with regard to leprosy. A leper was declared unclean, and had to live outside the community, that is, in the wilderness. If he came within sight of anyone, he had to shout “Unclean” so that the other person would be warned not to come anywhere near him. To Aaron and his sons, that is, the priests were given the diagnostic role of the doctor. It is a priest who examined the sick person, and either pronounced him leprous and placed him outside the community, or else declared him healthy and restored him to the community.

Given the social and religious taboos surrounding Jesus’ action in going against the Law may, at first sight, have seemed unthinkable and crazy. Far from running away from the leper, Jesus stretches out His hand towards the man. In doing so He shows us, not only His compassion for the outcasts of society, but also His absolute power over diseased human illnesses. Sure enough, the man is healed, but Jesus doesn’t stop there. He asks him to observe the Law by reporting to a priest, so that his recovery can be certified, the prescribed offering made and the man restored to society.

Our Lord Jesus wants to heal us, too, of our various illnesses, but before healing us, He expects us to display the three qualities which the leper displayed.

First, humility – acknowledging our illness. If we are too proud to admit that we are ill, then the healing cannot even begin. Second, courage – however ashamed the leper might have felt about his physical condition, he had the courage to leave aside that shame and come to Jesus. Having acknowledged our illness, we, too, need to come to Jesus if we wish to experience His healing power. Sadly, often fear prevents us from doing so. Third, faith – the leper did not say, “If You can, please heal me,” but, rather, “If You want to, You can cure me.” He had absolutely no doubt

that Jesus had the power to cure him. All that mattered was for Jesus to will it. Here was a beautiful example of faith. When we come to Jesus, He expects us to display the same unshakable faith. That is, to believe in His power and to appeal to His will. So much for the literal meaning of the story. We can now turn to the symbolic meaning and find out what the story is teaching us at the deeper, spiritual level.

What leprosy is to the skin, sin is to the soul. If we compare the soul which God has given us to a healthy skin, then our sins are like foul-smelling ulcers which disfigure the beauty of the soul. The effects of sin on the spiritual plane are very similar to the effects of leprosy on the physical plane. First, sin renders the person morally unclean and foul-smelling in relation to God's infinite holiness. If we wish to live in God's presence, we need to ask God continually to destroy our sins. Second, sin damages our relationship also with the community. There are no such thing as personal sins. Since we belong to the community of God's people, every sin however personal it may seem, has some damaging effect on our relationship with the community. If it is an extreme case of mortal sin, then, like full-blown leprosy, it puts us outside of the community altogether, that is, it excommunicates us morally. In such a case we cannot receive the Eucharist which is the deepest expression of communion in the Church.

The only way to be healed of the leprosy of sin, even venial sin, is to receive the Lord's forgiveness. In order to do so, we need to be properly disposed like the leper in the story. First, we must humbly acknowledge the sins we have committed in thought, word or deed and admit our need for forgiveness. None of us is without sin. As St. John says, "If we say we are sinless then we are liars." A humble examination of conscience reveals our sins. Second, we must pluck up the courage to turn to Jesus who is full of mercy and compassion as He was to the leper. Again, fear often prevents us from coming to Jesus, so we remain in our misery carrying our burden of sins. Third, we must have complete faith in Jesus' power to forgive our sins, no matter how big they are and how ashamed we might feel. Jesus is the Son of God and He has complete authority to forgive sins.

Having turned to Jesus in our hearts and disposed ourselves to receive His forgiveness, there is one final step to tread. It is mentioned almost like a postscript in the Gospel story, and it is an important postscript at that. It is the ministry of the priest and we encounter this in the Sacrament of Penance. Just as Jesus asked the leper to go and see a priest and make the prescribed offering as a symbol of his recovery, so also He asks each of us to go and see a priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation to confess our sins and perform the prescribed penance as a sign of the forgiveness and healing we have received from God. It is through the priest that Jesus grants us forgiveness. Through the priest, Jesus stretches out His hands over us and pronounces the words of absolution, just as He stretched out His hands over the leper and pronounced the words of healing.

People often ask the question, "Why do I need to go to confession to a priest when I can approach the Lord directly and be forgiven?" Well, now we know two reasons for this. One, Jesus Himself asks us to do so. It is through the priest that Jesus wishes to grant us His forgiveness, and that is enough for us. But there is also another reason. Two, in the Sacrament, the priest represents not only Our Lord, but

also the community of the Church of which he is the official representative. And since our sins damaged our relationship with the Church, the Lord entrusts to the priest the task of restoring that relationship with the Church.

Lord, may we hate sin more than people hate leprosy for sin separates us from You and our brothers and sisters. When we do sin may we rush to receive Your forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation for You have the power to heal us through Your priest.

THE SECRET SIDE OF LIFE

Mk. 1:40-45

It is not easy to keep a secret, especially if it's a really good story, something dramatic, unusual, and exciting - we can hardly resist the temptation to tell it to someone else.

Having said that, we can sympathise with the man in today's Gospel reading. He was a leper, which was one of the worst fates that could befall a person in first-century Palestine. The disease was not only a debilitating physical illness; it was also a social stigma. Leprosy was generally regarded as a sign of disfavour with God and was also thought to be highly contagious. Its victims were condemned to a life of loneliness. By law, they were ostracized from society, isolated from family and friends, and allowed to mingle with no one but other lepers.

Such was the circumstance of the man in our story until he met Jesus. The result was that he was cured of his disease and enabled once more to become a functioning member of the community. But why did Our Lord give this man specific instructions not to tell anyone what had happened? Now he could go back to his family, his work, his friends; but he was not to tell anyone how he had been healed or by whom. Well, as it turned out, the man was a complete failure at keeping such a secret.

I'm really not surprised at that. It's doubtful that you or I would have done much better. But why did the Lord give him that kind of instruction? All through the New Testament we are commanded to be witnesses; we are encouraged to speak up, to tell others what Christ has done in our lives. But here is a man whom the Lord had blessed beyond measure and is under orders to remain silent, to tell no one what Jesus had done for him. That's a curious thing, and we wonder why.

Part of the reason is obvious. By telling everyone about his cure Jesus could no longer openly enter the towns of that region. Instead He had to remain in the desert places and deal with the people who came to Him. The man's story had obviously generated so much excitement that the crowds became virtually unmanageable whenever it became known that Jesus was in town.

This was not the kind of publicity that Jesus needed or wanted. It was not His desire to lead a religious parade of over-excited, half-hearted, uncommitted people. He was looking for serious followers who had counted the cost and would still be around after the original excitement was over and forgotten. So, this man's testimony was actually more of a hindrance than a help. That was at least part of the reason why Jesus wanted him to keep the matter a secret just between the two of them.

However, I think there was more to it than that. I think it had something to do with the man himself. When Jesus told that man to remain silent it was not simply to protect His own privacy, it was intended as a ministry to the man. He told him to remain silent, because at that particular time in his life silence was one of the things he needed most. There are times when you and I need the same thing. Every life should have a secret side. Any life that doesn't have it is exceedingly shallow and lacking in something that is vital

In contrast to his reaction, I think of Mary, the mother of Our Lord. She, too, had a tremendous experience. The angel Gabriel came to her with the announcement that she would conceive and give birth to the Son of God. Nothing like that had ever happened before. Her mind must have been racing and her heart bursting with the news, but can you imagine Mary's going out and making that story public, just telling it to anyone she might happen to meet on the street? She didn't even tell this news to Joseph to whom she was betrothed!

Luke tells us what she did. First, she went to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth, whose life had also been touched by God. The two of them spent the next three months talking, thinking, wondering, and trying to understand. Then after the birth of Jesus, Luke tells us that "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart."

Something like that could have happened and should have happened in the life of the man in our story. What he needed most was not to talk about his wonderful cure, but to contemplate the goodness of God and to thank Him for His favour towards him. Later on, it might have been acceptable to talk, but first he needed something besides a sensational story to tell. One wonders if he ever came to grips with the real issues. Who was this Man who had healed him? Why did He do it? What did it all mean? How would he handle this new lease on life? Those were the key questions and unless he faced them squarely and answered them honestly, then his miracle, as wonderful as it was, never made much difference. A healthy body does not necessarily guarantee effective living.

The same thing, of course, applies to you and me, whether we have ever experienced a miraculous healing or not. In one way or another, we have had dealings with God. Every day in a hundred ways, He touches our lives, just as surely as Christ touched that lonely leper. The problem is that most of us don't slow down and shut up long enough to realise it.

I think Jesus must have had that in mind when He told this man to remain silent. He was trying to save him from shallowness. Every life needs a secret place where we treasure some sacred moments known only to God.

Lord Jesus, like Your mother Mary, may we ponder in silence all the wonderful things you have done for us in our lives.