**Homily for the 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B**

**February 7, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Job 7:1-4, 6-7 (I shall not see happiness again.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 147 (Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23 (Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!)*

*Gospel: Mark 1:29-39 (He cured many who were sick with various diseases.)*

The Book of Job is a story about trusting in God in the midst of suffering. While most of the book explores the age-old question of why good people suffer unjustly, through no fault of their own, that question is never really resolved. The characters in the story debate endlessly about why Job has been made to suffer so much. Job’s friends assume that he must have offended God in some way, but Job insists that he has done nothing wrong. Eventually, Job demands an explanation from God. But, rather than obliging him, God sarcastically informs Job that there are certain things which mere mortals like him are not equipped to understand.

In the first reading today, we can see the depth of Job’s despair. He has resigned himself to the sad conclusion: “I shall not see happiness again.” The cause of his despair is not just his physical pain and the emotional pain from losing all his loved ones and his possessions. Even worse is the feeling of utter helplessness. He can do *nothing* to alleviate his pain. His only recourse is to turn to the Lord for help and consolation, which he does at first. But, as many of us know from our own experiences of suffering, the passage of time can sorely test our trust in God. As Job’s afflictions grow worse, and as his friends keep trying to convince him that his suffering is proof that the Lord is angry with him, Job’s confidence in the Lord weakens, until it reaches a breaking point.

Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not at all uncommon. Sometimes people’s faith in God’s love can be shaken by a sudden or particularly painful loss, or it can erode over time as a painful situation persists. The current pandemic presents just such a test for many of us. For the first few weeks, it wasn’t too hard to say, “Let’s all be patient; the Lord will carry us through this.” But, after nearly a year of isolation and fear, not to mention the loss of loved ones and friends, we have to dig much deeper. We must resist the urge of Job’s friends, to blame the pain and suffering on God’s anger. And, we must also avoid Job’s mistake of thinking that God owes us an explanation. There’s nothing wrong with asking God for healing, but we cannot insist that God give it to us on our own terms. That’s the mistake we often make. We’re not willing to ask and then wait for the Lord to respond as he sees fit.

Today’s gospel presents Jesus as a healer of body, mind and spirit. He heals physical *and* spiritual infirmities, casting out demons and curing all sorts of illnesses. Yet, let’s not forget that there were countless people whom Jesus did *not* heal. How many blind beggars do you suppose there were in Israel during the time that Jesus was engaged in public ministry? Several thousand, perhaps? Yet, we have stories about only two or three of them being healed. What about the rest of them? Jesus healed a handful of lepers, too. But, how many more remained cast out of their communities, suffering and dying in isolation? For every paralytic who leaped up to follow Jesus, how many more remained unable to pick up their mats and walk? You get the point. Jesus did not come to heal *everyone* of every infirmity, nor to overcome all of society’s ills. That is simply impossible, even for God. Hence, we really should resign ourselves to the fact that there will *always* be pain and suffering and injustice in the world. The Lord is not going to snap his fingers and make it all go away. So, we had better consider what *our response* to these necessary evils is going to be.

First and foremost, we *must believe* that God sees what is happening and that God cares about our struggles. Despair tends to creep in when we wrongly ascribe to God either indifference or bad motives, in other words, when we doubt that he notices our plight or doubt his love for us. The Scriptures provide ample evidence to contradict those false ideas. Just skim through the gospels and see how often Jesus speaks about his Father’s love for the poor and the downtrodden, and notice all the ways that Jesus shows his deep concern for those who are suffering. But, let’s not confine our investigation to the *New* Testament, as if God didn’t care about his people until he sent Jesus into the world. The Prophets and the Psalms are filled with testimony to God’s love for his people, and his care for those who are most in need. For example, our Psalm response today was, “Praise the Lord, who *heals the brokenhearted*.” We can even go as far back as the story of the Burning Bush, when God says to Moses, “I have seen the affliction of my people.” Keep in mind, this was a people who barely even knew God. Yet, the Lord was watching over them and sharing their grief and their pain, without them even knowing. So, clearly, any suggestion that God doesn’t see our afflictions or doesn’t care about us is simply not true.

Second, we should recognize the obvious truth that many things are beyond our human comprehension, but *not* beyond God’s control. Even if God *wanted* to explain the great mystery of evil in the world, we couldn’t begin to understand the explanation, anyway. So, we need to maintain a certain degree of humility in the face of such mysteries. At the same time, there is no reason for us to think that God is as lost and confused as we are. God is actually in control of this whole, incomprehensible mess. If we are to have any peace of mind, especially in the midst of hardship and suffering, we *must* hold fast to that well-founded belief.

In difficult times, the best course of action is always to place our hope in a loving, compassionate and vigilant God, while also doing our part to help ourselves and each other. During this pandemic, for instance, we can do a lot to slow the spread of the virus, just by exercising common sense and tolerating some small inconveniences, like wearing masks everywhere we go, for the sake of the other people we encounter. We can also reach out in various ways to care for those who are struggling with fear, grief or depression. We can assure them of *our* love and *God’s* love. Thus, we can bolster our neighbor’s confidence (and, perhaps, our own) that we’re all in this together, and that the Lord is *right here with us*, with his immense power to heal *all* that afflicts us.