

# The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Job 7:1-4, 6-7
<i>Response</i>	Praise the Lord, who heals the brokenhearted.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 147:1-2, 3-4, 5-6
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Christ took away our infirmities and bore our diseases.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 1:29-39

The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year B adds another dimension to the portrait of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. As was seen this Sunday, Jesus is not just an exorcist, he is also a physician, he's also a healer. And so this Sunday we're going to look at Mark 1:29-39, with our focus now being a little more on Jesus' healing ministry and what he was doing in that ministry. So Mark chapter 1 says this, verse 29:

And immediately he 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 pursued him, and they found him and said to him, "Every one 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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, so what are we to make of the Gospel for this Sunday? There are lots of things to point out here. First, notice Mark's style. Once again he uses that word "immediately" twice, and just gives you a sense of the dynamism and the activism, so to speak, in a positive sense of the word, of Jesus's ministry. Jesus is not resting on his laurels. He's not laying about idle. He is active; he is intent on bringing the kingdom of God wherever he goes. He's not resting now, he's begun his ministry. The second aspect of this story that's interesting is just the focus on the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. It's kind of interesting, you get a little window into the personal life of one of the apostles, in which Jesus not only heals, you know, strangers in the crowd or lepers or those kind of people, but actually heals a relative of the leader of his apostles, in this case Peter, now who was called Simon at this point still. So one of the things interesting about this particular passage is the way it describes Jesus' healing. So up to this point we've seen Jesus cast out demons but how does he heal? A couple things stand out. First, Simon's mother-in-law is sick just with a fever. So this is the kind of illness that is part of ordinary life, right? And yet Jesus is still attentive to it, and he touches her by the hand, and lifts her up. And when he touches her it says the fever left her and then she came and she served them.

So I think this passage is interesting just because, you know, it's one thing to cast out a demon, as we're going to see later in Mark's gospel, he's going to cast out a man who had a legion of demons possessing him. It's another thing to raise Lazarus after he's been dead for three days in the tomb, like in the Gospel of John. But Jesus was also attentive to the smaller sufferings of human life, the basic things that we all struggle with, which would be sickness and illness, in this case a fever; a fever which in that first century Jewish context doesn't appear to have been life-threatening but was rendering Peter's mother-in-law unable to offer the kind of hospitality that would've been ordinary in that first century culture. So to this day, I know in my own life, that when we have people coming over to visit, my wife takes great pride in getting the house ready and offering hospitality to our guests, right. It's a beautiful aspect of family life and in this case what appears to be going on is that Peter's mother-in-law is unable to serve them, in other words, probably serve them food, prepare a meal, that kind of thing, in order to welcome them into the home because she's sick. So what does Jesus do? He reaches out, he touches her, and when he touches her, her fevers gone, she's healed. So a beautiful little window there into the life of the apostles.

Which, as a side note, you might be wondering, well hold on a second, if Peter had a mother-in-law doesn't that suggest that Peter was married, right? It raises

the whole question of celibacy, and the priesthood, and all that. Well, I can do a whole presentation just on that but just two quick points for those who might be curious about this. First, it goes without saying that, if Peter had a mother-in-law that at some point he had a wife, right, because that's part of the deal; if you get a mother-in-law, you should get a wife, that's part of the bargain there. So in this case, Peter obviously has married at some point, but some of the church fathers, like St. Jerome in his book *Against Jovinian*, suggested here that Peter was in fact a widower by the time of Jesus' public ministry. And one reason you might infer that from the text is because if it's in Peter's house you would actually expect that his wife would act as the hostess for a gathering in the home, and that she would serve the guests, that would've been customary at the time. So it's a bit weird, it's a bit strange, that in order for Jesus and his companions to be served, Peter's mother-in-law would need to be made well to help them. So in other words, in a nutshell, what's missing from the story, what's conspicuously absent from the story, is any account of Peter's wife. So that led several of the church fathers to suggest that Peter himself was a widower, that he had been married, but that he was no longer married at the time of Jesus' public ministry. If that's true, it's kind of interesting too, because it shows that Peter himself would've tasted sorrow and suffering, the ordinary sorrow and suffering of married life, even before he began the special call to be Jesus' apostle and the chief of the 12. All right, so that's the story of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law.

Now that is a kind of prelude then to a host of healings and exorcisms that Jesus performs in Capernaum because it says here, in the next few verses, that as the sun was going down, people began to bring to him all who were sick and were possessed. So you can imagine here what happened was the word got out from that previous healing at the synagogue, on the Sabbath, that Jesus had the power over the demonic, and so people start bringing all kinds of people who were ill, or who were possessed, to the door of Simon Peter's house. And this is one of those episodes where you can imagine, it must have been overwhelming to be Jesus' apostles with the whole town beating down your door trying to get him to cast out the demon from your nephew, or your brother, or to heal your wife, or whatever it might of been. Because that kind of power, that kind of *exousia* authority, like we saw in the earlier verses in Mark, was something that would've attracted a lot of attention.

So it says here that Jesus did two things: he healed many who were "sick" and he also cast out unclean spirits from many who were "possessed with demons"; the Greek word here is actually *daimonizomai*, we get the word demoniac from that, someone who is under the power of the demonic. So I bring this up because

you'll notice here that Mark is very clear about the distinction between a healing miracle and an exorcism, those are not the same thing. Sometimes you'll hear contemporary readers of the gospel say, oh well when they were talking about exorcisms, they were just talking about healings, and they thought that all sickness was the result of demonic power, demonic influence. That's just false, that's not true. You can actually see that, although illness and sin go together in the Old Testament, an illness and demonic activity can be associated with one another, that's not necessarily the case. They make a distinction between healings, like a woman with a fever, and then people who are possessed, those are exorcisms. So that distinction is operative at the beginning of Mark's gospel and it's important for us to keep it in mind as we move through his gospel, and you'll see a lot more of this kind of activity.

The last thing though, you'll notice there is that, once again the messianic secret, the secret of Jesus's identity, is kept under wraps. He wouldn't permit the demons to speak because they knew him. Now that's a weird thing. Why is it, how is it, that the demons knew who Jesus was? Well we don't know. The gospel doesn't tell us how they knew or why they knew, but it's interesting. If you look at some of the ancient Christian writers on the subject, in the ancient church fathers, one of the suggestions that they make about this is that they recognize Jesus because Jesus was preexistent right. In other words, unlike you or I, Jesus didn't come into existence when he was conceived in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, right, he's the divine son of God, who through, whom the whole world was made. In fact, through whom the Angels are made and therefore the fallen angels, in a sense, have met him before, right, at their own creation, as well as at their own judgment, whenever they fell and sin against the Lord, at the dawn of all time, is how the catechism describes it. And so, in a sense, they are recognizing him, and the second that they recognize that this man, who has cast them out, is also the divine son of God, or as earlier as the high priest, the true high priest of God, Jesus immediately shuts them up, he silences them because it's not time yet for him to reveal the full mystery of his identity. He's going to be carrying out this exorcistic ministry, this healing ministry, in order to perform the signs and wonders, and to give teachings to people that are going to help prepare them for the coming of the kingdom of God, and prepare them for what he's going to accomplish on Calvary, through the cross and through his resurrection. And that's going to take some time, right? So, if Jesus goes around the streets of Galilee and Capernaum saying, hey everybody, I'm the Messiah, I'm God made man, he's going to end up getting crucified a lot quicker than if he performs this slow and steady ministry of revealing his power and revealing his identity over the course of what appears to

be a three-year cycle of ministry in the Gospels. Which, by the way, just dawned on me, it's kind of interesting, the gospel of Jesus' public ministries is three years and in the liturgical year, how long do we take to walk through the Gospels? Well, we journey with Christ for a three-year period. It's kind of neat. It's one of those little coincidences that I think sometimes are spiritually significant for how the church takes us into the mystery of Christ, and into the mystery of his life. So that at the end of three years of studying the Gospels, we're like the disciples of Jesus. We've walked with him for a long enough time, to get to know him, and to start to understand the mysteries of who he was and what he did.

Well in any case, the gospel then shifts and says that in the morning, after all this took place, a long time before the day, Jesus rose and went out to a lonely place and there he prayed. Now I didn't put anything about this on the outline but I actually think it's important to make a note here. Jesus did not engage in ministry without praying first, right. Jesus' habit was to get up early and to begin his day with prayer and I think we could all learn from that, right. If we're Christians, we're supposed to imitate Christ and sometimes people say, well I don't know how to pray, I'm not sure when to pray. Well with regard to the latter question. It's a pretty easy question there. When did Jesus pray? The Gospels are really clear, that he would often pray alone early in the morning or late at night, or both, right. Because those are the times when things are quiet, and you can actually get some time to yourself, especially if you're a parent, right, and you have lots of duties for the children during the day, with school, or if you work. A lot of times the only chance you can have to be alone is either early in the morning or late at night, and so those are good times for prayer. We see here that even Jesus needs to get away for a while, and be by himself, and be alone with his father in prayer. So that's just kind of a neat window into Jesus' prayer life in this episode from Mark's gospel. By the way, you also can imagine, you would want to get away after having those crowds swarm him for the previous evening, because when somebody like this can perform healings, it's going to draw lots and lots of attention; it's going to be hard to get a moment to himself.

Now it says that as he was out praying, Simon and those who were with him followed him and they said, look everyone's looking for you, right. So he's trying to get away but it's even hard in the morning and then he basically says well we're going to leave. Why, well because we have to go to the next town, so that I can preach there also, because that is why I came. So he goes throughout all Galilee preaching in synagogues and casting out demons. So what does that mean? In conclusion, for the gospel here, what it shows us is that, Jesus was

always on the move. He didn't stay in one place too long because his mission was to bring the good news of God's kingdom to as many people as possible within his appointed area. So he's going to be bringing the gospel throughout Galilee and then, as we'll see also, he's going to go down to Judea in the South and bring it there as well. But he's not sitting idle. There's a certain urgency to his mission in the Gospel of Mark.

Okay now with all that said, what about the Old Testament? In this case, it's from one of the most popular books in the Old Testament, one of the most beautiful books in the Old Testament, which is the book of Job. As you're turning to Job 7, I would just highlight for you too, I hope you're already beginning to notice in Year B that although the readings from Mark or short, they're packed, huh? I mean, there's a lot in these few verses. We're not even out of Mark 1 yet, and we're already in the fifth Sunday of Ordinary time; we haven't even gotten out of the first chapter of the gospel. This gospel is rich, it's packed, and so are the Old Testament readings for today. Job 7 is one of the most poignant passages in the Old Testament, in my opinion. It's about suffering. It's about the fact that life on earth is drudgery and is really difficult. And this is what Job says:

Has not man a hard service upon earth,  
and are not his days like the days of a hireling?  
Like a slave who longs for the shadow,  
and like a hireling who looks for his wages,  
so I am allotted months of emptiness,  
and nights of misery are apportioned to me.  
When I lie down I say, `When shall I arise?'  
But the night is long,  
and I am full of tossing till the dawn.

And then it skips down to verse 6:

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle,  
and come to their end without hope.  
Remember that my life is a breath;  
my eye will never again see good.

Okay very uplifting, huh? I mean, what a downer. Why does the church pick this reading from Job for the Old Testament reading for today? Well a couple of

points. First, notice it's just describing life on earth as drudgery. The RSV here translates it as a hard service, but I like the New American Bible translation better, "life is drudgery", life is like slavery. He is saying being a human being is like being a hireling. Why? Well in part, back to the book of Genesis, the curse of Adam is you're going to work but the Earth is going to bring forth thorns and thistles; in other words, fruitless toil is the lot of human beings in this life. And as a result, you're not going to make it through this life very long without tasting suffering, without tasting misery. Job here gives some powerful images: months of emptiness, nights of misery. Wow. And maybe you can identify with that in your own life. There's a musician and I enjoy one of her songs. She talks about how life is filled with patches of joy and stretches of sorrow. In other words, yes there's joy, but a lot of times they tend to be short and beautiful. But we've got these long stretches of suffering and sorrow, and you can even see in Job, this image of the night taking so long. That in the mist of anxiety, or maybe when you're ill or worried, you can stay awake all night, and the night can get really long. And it's at night that we can really experience our own weakness, our own littleness, and just the reality of human suffering, and human misery in this life. And as a result, we can kind of be more in tune to the fact that, when you really get down to things, our life, as Job says, is just a breath, right. We're here for a very short while and then we're gone.

Now what does that have to do with the gospel. Well think about it. The gospel for this week is focused on the fact that Jesus isn't just an exorcist, he's not just with power over the demonic, he's also Jesus the healer. He comes into this world not just to cast out the great power of the devil. He comes into this world to touch the misery of human life. He comes into this world to heal us, even down to the very small things like the misery of a fever, of ordinary human illness. That's something that Jesus comes in this world and he shows us he has power over. He has the power to bring peace to us in the midst of our suffering and through the resurrection he's going to overcome all of that. He's not just going to overcome Satan, he's going to overcome suffering, sickness, and death itself. And so the first reading for today is a beautiful example from the Old Testament, the reality of human misery, which has its answer in the good news of Jesus Christ and in the good news of our Savior.

And you can see that in the Responsorial Psalm. Today, the Responsorial Psalm is Psalm 147, and the refrain for the day is that God heals the brokenhearted. That's the focus of this day's verses. And in this case, Psalm 147:2 and following, he says this:

The LORD builds up Jerusalem;  
he gathers the outcasts of Israel.  
He heals the brokenhearted,  
and binds up their wounds.

And then it goes on — this is interesting — it goes on to say:

He determines the number of the stars,  
he gives to all of them their names.

What does that mean? What the Psalm is saying here is two things. First, that God heals the wounded, that he is a good God who has the power to heal our wounds, even the wounds of the heart. So if you're brokenhearted, this Sunday is for you, because you have a God who heals the brokenhearted. The second thing that the Psalm emphasizes is God's omniscience. In other words, if he's able to number the stars, if he's able to count the stars and he gives every star a name; guess what? That means he knows everything. So if God is omniscient, that means he knows what you're going through. He knows about your suffering. He's not ignorant of the misery and the drudgery of human life. He is not ignorant of the illness and sickness and suffering that human beings daily experience in this valley of tears. So the God of the Bible is not a distant God. He is also not an ignorant God. He's a God who knows every star in the universe and so he knows the wounds of every single human heart. It's a beautiful, beautiful truth to ponder. And it's that God, the God of Psalm 147, the God who heals the brokenhearted, the God who counts the stars and who gave all the stars their names; he is the one, it is that God, who becomes man in Jesus Christ and comes into the world and touches the hand of Simon Peter's mother-in-law and says get up, be healed. That's the God who comes in the mission and message and the ministry of Jesus Christ, the son of God. That's what Jesus' ministry is all about.

And I would like to close here once again with some words from the Catechism. In this case, when it comes to Jesus' identity as the physician, as a healer, the Catechism has one of the — I think — most beautiful reflections on this that I've ever read anywhere. It's in the section on the Anointing of the Sick, which is really the sacrament of suffering. The church has a section called Christ the Physician, and I am just going to read a few words from two paragraphs and just let you reflect on those. So the first thing it says is about Christ's ministry to the sick and suffering. Paragraph 1503 of the Catechism says this:



Christ's compassion toward the sick and his many healings of every kind of infirmity are a resplendent sign that "God has visited his people" and that the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Jesus has the power not only to heal, but also to forgive sins; he has come to heal the whole man, soul and body; *he is the physician the sick have need of*. His compassion toward all who suffer goes so far that he identifies himself with them: "I was sick and you visited me." *His preferential love for the sick has not ceased through the centuries* to draw the very special attention of Christians toward all those who suffer in body and soul. It is the source of tireless efforts to comfort them...

Pause there for a second. Notice what it says there. Jesus Christ is the divine physician and Jesus Christ has a special preferential love for those who are sick. So I don't know if you have ever been at a Mass where people will say out loud the intentions for the Mass, whenever sometimes it happens, invariably what do people bring up? Illness, illness, illness, illness, illness. Illness touches all of us. It touches our families in some way, shape or form, and it can feel like God has abandoned us in that. Well what the Catechism is saying here is no. Christ is a divine physician. He has a special love for the poor and he's actually present, in a kind of mystical way, in those who are sick or suffering, and that he came into this world in his ministry to heal every kind of infirmity. There is nothing too big or too small for him as part of his ministry. Now you might say well hold on, I know somebody who is sick or maybe I'm sick and Christ hasn't healed me. What is that about? Well look at paragraph 1505, because the Church continues to say this, it says:

*Moved by so much suffering Christ not only allows himself to be touched by the sick, but he makes their miseries his own: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." But he did not heal all the sick. His healings were signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through his Passover. On the cross Christ took upon himself the whole weight of evil and took away the "sin of the world," of which illness is only a consequence. By his passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion.*

Alright, we could do a whole class just on that one paragraph. In a nutshell, what's it saying here? It is really important. Yes, Christ comes in to the world to heal.

Yes, he shows us his power over sickness and suffering. But his mission, his vocation by God the Father, is not to heal every single sick person. Those healings are signs of the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God ultimately comes through his supreme victory in his death and resurrection on the cross. It's only the resurrection that every sickness, every suffering, and all death will be undone. For now, we have to recognize that God allows sickness and suffering to take place, and that for us as Christians, Christ has given a new meaning to our sickness and our suffering, by uniting it to the cross, by uniting it to his passion, so that we can actually, in union with Christ, offer our illness, offer our sufferings, for the salvation of the world in union with his redemptive passion and cross. In other words, Christ's death and resurrection not only brings the ultimate healing in the future, it also brings meaning to our suffering now in the present as we walk through this valley of tears and we taste the drudgery and the misery that Job talked about in the first reading. In the midst of that misery, in the midst of that suffering, in the midst of that sickness, we have to always remember that Christ is the ultimate victor. Christ is the ultimate savior and that Christ is the divine physician, who one day, whether in this life or the next, will heal us.