

The 5th Sunday of Year B: What bring us peace of mind?

1st Reading: Job 7:1-4+6-7: Job longs for peace - of mind & body;

2nd Reading: 1 Cor 9:16-19+22-23: Paul feels ‘driven’ to preach;

Gospel: Mark 1:29-39: Jesus’ spectacular start to his Galilee work...but?

These days, the news is often about mental illness and its effects. Whether all this is linked to after-effects of the pandemic, the problems of modern life in general, or both, I am not competent to judge. However, this weekend, all 3 readings share the theme of finding mental & emotional peace in our lives. In the 1st reading, Job (the famous sufferer, whose friends offered useless advice instead of comfort) yearns for answers to his questioning of God, as well as an end to his suffering. In the 2nd reading, St Paul admits he only gets spiritual peace when he is busy preaching. In the gospel, our Lord starts his work in Galilee with ‘success’ in the human sense – but feels the need to find time for privacy and prayer, before moving on to work elsewhere.

Let us deal with the gospel first. If you read the text, you feel a sense of speed & breathlessness: they told Jesus about Peter’s mother-in-law’s illness “*straightaway*”; later, “*the whole town came crowding round the door*”; next day, the disciples told Jesus: “*Everybody is looking for you*”. Although this seems like real achievement, it also sounds worryingly like hyper-activity. This explains why Jesus needed to get away for spiritual refreshment – and peace. St Mark’s is the gospel where this very human side of Jesus is seen openly. If you jump forward to Mark 3:20-21, you find a rarely-heard account of how Jesus’ relations reacted to all this amazing activity in Galilee. Mark writes: “*He went home again (to Nazareth?) and such a crowd gathered that they could not even have a meal. When his relatives heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, convinced he was out of his mind.*” Some readers may be shocked by this almost-unknown event, but it is in the gospel. Since most scholars feel that Mark was Peter’s helper, it is likely that this comes from St Peter himself.

In total contrast is the first reading, where Job is upset about what has befallen him. (He had lost possessions, family, and finally his health.) In bed at night, he wonders when day will come; during the day, he frets that evening comes too slowly. I am no expert, but this sounds to me like depression. Job’s is that state of mind some people call “nervous breakdown”, when a mixture of sadness, exhaustion and apathy lead a person to sit and do nothing. This is not laziness, nor a simple problem that can be solved by being told to “snap out of it”, but a real illness. The reading ends with Job saying: “*Remember that my life is but a breath, and that my eyes will never again see joy.*” Yes, he is certainly

depressed, but I suspect that many families who have faced our cost-of-living crisis - and the various wars throughout the world - feel the same.

On a happier note, I refer you to the middle reading, where St Paul, writing to the Church in Corinth, discusses his attitude to his work. He sees it not a matter for boasting, but as a duty laid on him by God. He feels he would be “punished” if he did not preach the gospel. By this, I think he means that he would feel unfulfilled or empty if he ignored this work. His reward? – the contentment, or peace of mind, of being able to offer God’s message of hope freely to all who want to hear it. To do this, (in a famous passage) he writes, “*I have made myself all things to all men*”, to allow the message to reach as many as possible. I find this very positive, in contrast to the depression of Job and Jesus’ frantic activity in Galilee, as described by St Mark. This is not to criticize Job or Jesus, but merely to notice what those bible passages tell us.

Where do we find peace of mind, or contentment, these days? When it comes to the activity / leisure balance, I suggest we need a happy medium. Job’s depression & inertia are no way to live; nor could we sustain the pressure that Jesus had in his first months of public life, in Galilee. When we get into a hyper-active state of life (work, or family, or social), we find little or no time to ask ourselves questions like: ‘What am I doing?’ ‘Why am I doing this?’ ‘Must it be done this way?’ When this leads to burn-out, we are unhappy in ourselves, and are less useful to others. With the huge backlog of cases to be treated, I worry that this may now happen to many NHS people. Like Jesus, we also need some time for prayer. Even a few minutes each day (in whatever way suits us) makes a huge difference. It is a pity that a lot of people have not returned to Sunday Mass over the past couple of years, since the churches have reopened fully. Prayer is social as well as personal, and we get support from each other.

No one solution fits everyone’s needs, but the society we were building before the Covid problem involved ever-more “success” and ever-less time for personal and spiritual life. Many people had become unhappy – either they felt the consumer society wasn’t for them, or they could not compete with others in acquiring wealth and ‘things’. I do think that in the past couple of years, people have come to appreciate this problem, and have become less obsessed with personal wealth. Peace of mind and self-worth must mean more than just aiming for more & more money. We need another purpose: somewhere along the line, this involves relationships – including God. *Fr Jim Dunne.*