

5th Sunday per Annum - B
Job 7:1-4, 6-7;
I Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23;
Mark 1:29-39
Little Flower - 2/7/21

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's first reading comes from the Book of Job. Most of us are generally familiar with the backstory of Job. Job was a good man who obeyed God and avoided evil. He also was blessed with a good family and great riches. One day God asked Satan if Satan had noticed Job and his goodness. Satan challenged God by arguing that Job was so good because he had been so blessed. Therefore, God gave Satan permission to test Job by taking away everything he held dear: his family, his possessions, even his good health. Even his friends turned against him.

In today's first reading, having lost everything, Job is lamenting the challenges and difficulties of life. After almost a year of living with COVID, the words of Job could be our words. Like Job, almost everyone has suffered losses—some greater, some smaller—since COVID began. Likewise, I think that most of us are at least a little depressed after struggling with COVID for the past year.

We all know how dependent children are on their parents. When they become adolescents, their task is to become their own person and, therefore, to become independent. However, as adults, we are challenged to become interdependent. I have learned at least two lessons during COVID. The first is that as much of an introvert as I am, I need to be with others more than I realized. The second, more recent insight, is just how fragile we all are. Our families, our relationships, our lives are very fragile. In Morris West's novel *The Ambassador*, Musō Soseki refers to the "fragility of the inward self."

At times parishes can be too concerned with church affairs and not enough engaged with the real lives and struggles of people. If we are all fragile, what does it mean to be a parish or a Christian community during these times? How can we make the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Christ visible and real to one another?

Today's reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians helps answer these questions. Paul wrote that he offered the gospel free of charge. For me, however, the key verse is "*I have become all things to all, to save at least some.*" Paul offered the gospel or good news free of charge by becoming all things to all. Becoming all things to all is to become compassionate.

If we want to engage with the real lives of people and bring Christ to them, we have to become compassionate. Compassion has two key elements. First, a compassionate person has to be sensitive to the real needs of others, both those that are expressed as well as those that are not expressed. In other words, a compassionate person is empathetic and able to read between the lines. The second dimension of compassion is responsiveness to the real needs of others. However, it is not just any response but a personally appropriate response.

My brothers and sisters, in today's Gospel, Jesus revealed the meaning of compassion. When they entered Peter and Andrew's house, Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus "*approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her.*" That evening when they brought all who were sick or possessed to him, "*he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons....*" We are told that he then went off to a deserted place and prayed. The next day when the disciples told him that everybody was looking for him, he told them it was time to move to nearby villages so he could preach there also. In everything he did, Jesus embodied the compassion of God. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus told us, "*Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate*" [Luke 6:36; NAB 1971]. When we are compassionate, we make the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ, visible and real to others.