

**Sermon preached at St John's Timberhill on
6th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 11th February 2018**

by Fr Christopher Wood

A Mass to say farewell to Sr Pamela CAH.

Mark chapter 1 v40-45. Healing of the leper

That Gospel reading of St Mark from chapter 1 is one of those short stories which appears to be a simple and straight forward message. Here Our Blessed Lord is approached by a Leper who kneels before him and begs for his help. Jesus, feeling deep compassion for him reaches out and touches him and he is healed. Our Lord tells him not to tell anyone but the man can't contain himself and goes out immediately and tells everyone about his healing and so the message about Jesus spreads far and wide, so much so that he can't approach a town at all, but has to stay in the countryside while crowds come out to seek him.

So, the message seems simple enough.

- Our Blessed Lord is the source of God's healing grace;
- We know that Christ is compassionate to those who seek him; and he is especially welcoming of those who are normally excluded by society.
- And those who received God's grace can't help but tell others.

But to take only this message means that we have skipped lightly over a problem in the Gospel text. That is that the healed leper is told specifically not to tell anyone. The fact that he does seems to be an act of disobedience. Almost childlike naughtiness.

See how the text puts it

Jesus immediately sent him away and sternly ordered him "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as evidence of your recovery."

This is not a light 'try not to tell too many people' or 'I would prefer it if we kept this to ourselves'. It says that he sternly warned him. The word here is a strong one. It means to scold or tell off or to censor. Our Lord did not intend these words to be taken lightly.

And his instruction, '*Say nothing to anyone ...*' It doesn't get clearer than that. Do not tell anyone about this. Rather, Christ wants him to show himself to the priest and to make the thanksgiving offering in the temple for his healing. But it appears that he does neither but rather goes straight out and does the very things that Our Blessed Lord warns him not to do.

What is going on here?

Let me suggest something to you. Our Lord is making clear to the man that healing is a good deal more than instant cure. As well as bodily health, wellbeing is much to do with being restored as part of a community and ensuring the grace of God is lived out in a new life of worship, discipline and thanksgiving.

This man, who has been excluded because of his leprosy from both community and worship in the temple is to reconnect with both and must make his contribution to the life of his people. His healing isn't simply a miracle for its own sake but for the sake of others and to be located within a life of dedicated service.

In my life I have worked a good deal in settings like prisons and hostels where many people had a history of drug and drink offences. The departments and organisations that specialised in working with addiction were often staffed by those who had found the grace to let go of their own addictions and were therefore deeply committed in helping others relinquish the grip of drink and drug addiction. That was their response to grace.

Encountering God's grace is never just about a personal miracle.

There is always something more.

You can probably think of examples. Remember Nelson Mandela ...I often wonder what he thought when he was finally released from prison ... when his freedom came ...would that be a moment of release and then relaxation for the rest of his life? Surely you would think so. No! He stepped up to the plate...became President, set up the truth and reconciliation commission... and led his country into the future. Others

may not have lived up to his ideals and his legacy, but what he did was remarkable. His release became for him, an opportunity to return to society and serve others.

Now that is where my words this morning shift to a much more local matter when it comes to living out God's grace.

For generations the history of this area, not just church members, but this area in the widest sense, has benefitted from the work and dedication of Sisters of the Community of All Hallows. The history of that Community and of this parish are woven together. Teaching, work with children, social work before we professionalized that concept to take most of the heart and soul out of it. Food parcels in the depression and in the war to those households that had great need but also had pride. Living out the Gospel as part of the implication of receiving God's Grace in a vocation to the Religious life.

Nuns have passed the baton of works motivated by faith in this parish for decades. Sister Pamela took on that role 17, nearly 18 years ago. And I want to mention especially the lives of young woman who found their way to the project at Little Portion behind Magdalene Street. Lives in whom her work and care made a vital difference. But also here in this parish. Hospitality and a human response to so many over the years. As well as caring for St Julian's Church, which is a gap I can hardly contemplate.

It would appear that as Sister Pamela moves on to a new life, offering hospitality on Mull, close to the Holy island of Iona, the baton is not to be handed on. The thread breaks. In sadness sister, we rejoice with you at your brave new step in your vocation.

In Ditchingham, at the convent, there is a holy spot, a simple grave yard. There you can see names of nuns one after another. Names I hear from strangers who visit both our churches, and they say "I was born here, or brought up round here" and straight away they talk about this sister or that, by name, who made a deep impression.

Sister, you will not be forgotten here. We thank you. Our prayers go with you. And we recognise the challenge. The baton now passes.....to us, to respond to the grace received in OUR LIVES by living it out in the ways that we too respond to the needs of others.

Receiving grace from God means that we take our part in building a better world with God. If we do that, then our telling of the good news will be all the more authentic.

AMEN