

Passion Sunday (C)
(Isaiah 50:4-7 / Luke 22:14-23:56)
20.03.2016

In Year C of the three year liturgical cycle of Scripture readings, it is the Passion Narrative of St Luke that we are invited to read and meditate upon as we celebrate this Passion Sunday.

Luke's gospel account is often considered and spoken of as *the gospel of mercy* and also as *the gospel of healing*.

Given the place healing holds in Luke's gospel account, I will draw special attention to this theme as it runs throughout Luke's passion narrative.

I am inspired to pay particular attention to this theme given the context in which we find ourselves: that of *the Great Year of Mercy*. Pope Francis has proposed this *Year of Mercy* as a contribution to the much needed healing of our wounded Church and broken world.

The Lord's gifts of healing and mercy are on offer to us as we read God's word this morning. We all stand in need of both these gifts, for we are, all of us, wounded and broken persons.

Prayer is the privileged way for us to open our hearts and receive Christ's gifts of healing and mercy. Our reading of Luke's passion narrative confirms this for us. It both begins and ends in prayer.

Early on in the sequence of events we see Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In that same place, in the part of the story dealing with His arrest, Jesus is seen to heal the servant injured in the scuffle which took place between His captors and the disciples who sought to protect Him.

Towards the end of the narrative Jesus prays again. We hear Him plead that mercy be shown to His executioners. He pleads for them simply with these words: *Father, forgive them*.

As we read through Luke's story of the passion a few striking events attract our attention and point us in the direction of Christ's reconciling grace which is seen to be at work in the whole drama of pain and suffering Jesus endured for us.

Let us go through the Luke's passion narrative now to pinpoint and flag up illustrations of what I have been hinting at so far.

I said I would come back to the servant's experience in the garden.

The incident surrounding this soldier of the temple guard at the time of Jesus' arrest is very significant. We are told how when the mob approached to arrest Jesus, led by His betrayer, Judas Iscariot, Jesus' disciples exclaimed that they had swords, suggesting that they could fight off those who came to take Him captive. In verse 50 of Luke 22 we read how *one of them slashed at the High Priest's servant and cut off his right ear*. The text goes on to tell us how Jesus intervened immediately, ordering that no resistance be shown. At this point Luke notes: *(Jesus) touched the place where the man's ear had been and restored it*. By this little note Luke draws our attention to Christ's compassion. Once more Jesus' healing ministry is recalled. Even in His passion, Christ is shown to have exercised a life-restoring mission in regard to the wounded and suffering of this world.

Jesus' attention to the afflicted – a major theme overall in Luke's gospel account – is not forgotten either. Luke depicts Jesus not only wishing no ill to anyone, but even more than that, actively working for their well-being, including the well-being of those who are very clearly not out for His good. Christ's whole attitude lends credibility – if it was needed – to the words He is recorded to have spoken to His disciples: *Do good to those who set out to harm you*.

A little further on into Luke's passion narrative the healing theme is woven into the text again.

In that section of Luke 23 where we see a to and fro being played out between Pilate and Herod in

regard to the judgement to be pronounced on Jesus' fate, we are told how through these negotiations *Herod and Pilate – enemies before – became fast friends*. Jesus is seen here to be a reconciler, the healer of a wounded, fraught relationship.

Eventually, as He hangs upon the cross, mention is made of the fact that during His earthly ministry Jesus was so good at helping others. Among the good Jesus had accomplished they were surely thinking of His many healing miracles. The crowd jeered: *He was so good at helping others, let us see Him save Himself if He really is God's Chosen One, the Messiah*.

Precisely because He is *God's Chosen One, the Messiah*, the One sent to redeem us, *the Suffering Servant by whose wounds we are healed*, Jesus does not save Himself. His concern is not to save Himself, but to live His passion for humankind's salvation. Jesus knows that humanity's healing will result from His reconciling death. He is aware that by His wounds humanity will be healed.

Jesus' final prayer recorded for us in Luke's passion narrative is one of confidence and trust.

If He is shown to have entered into His sacred passion *in anguish and distress*, praying that the cup of suffering might pass Him by, He is depicted, having gone through this terrible night of distress, to have arrived at perfect confidence of heart. As His end draws upon Him, Jesus is led to say in all simplicity: *Father, I commit my spirit to you*.

Jesus' spirit which He committed to the Father was a spirit of mercy and compassion.

Luke records for us in the Acts of the Apostles – his sequel to the gospel – how, *during His earthly life, Jesus had gone about everywhere doing the good*.

His final prayer presented everything and everyone to the Father. In His spirit, Jesus carried one and all. His final prayer was clearly an expression of His longing for humanity's reconciliation, healing and restoration to fullness of life.

We know that Luke – whose gospel account we read today – was not only an historian, but also a physician. If the third evangelist's interest in history is laid out for us in the very first line of his gospel account, we are told elsewhere that he was a physician by profession.

It is no doubt Luke's personal interest in and care for those suffering that led him to pay so much attention to the Master's concern for people's well-being in the whole of his gospel. Again and again, Luke emphasises Christ's care for the broken-hearted, those wounded by life, those scarred and in need of healing, mercy and compassion. We witness this not least in the passion narrative read this morning.

The third evangelist wants his readers – and today we are those readers – to realise Jesus' compassion for all. He wanted his readers – us included – to know Christ's concern for the downtrodden. For Luke Jesus is the great healer of all who are hurt in life.

Time and time again, Luke's stories focus on Jesus' relationships with individual people. He depicts Jesus as a man with great personal interest in each one. Luke also shows Jesus as a man who sought to lead those He encountered to relate better to each other.

Just as during His lifetime Jesus paid attention to people in need of mercy and compassion – women, for example, who were largely ignored by society, children who were often exploited and shown little consideration, the poor, prostitutes, despised tax-collectors – so, in His dying moments, He is seen to care for those being put to death beside Him. Jesus looks with pity upon those men sentenced to death for crimes they had committed. He assured the one who asked for admittance to His kingdom, that he would be with Him in paradise that very day. This was typical of Jesus. Had He not always offered salvation, hope, spiritual recovery to everyone He met, but especially the outcasts of society?

We have already seen how Jesus' care and compassion was expressed in a prayer imploring pardon for those who put Him to death.

If among the gospel writers Luke stresses the humanity and compassion of Jesus, there is a reason for this.

It was to lead us to reflect the same loving kindness, tender mercy and healing hope of Christ to all those we encounter.

If Luke's gospel makes it clear that God reaches out in love to the broken-hearted, disfigured and unlovable of this world through His Son, let us understand that our reading of his Good News account should lead us to be as Christ was and do as Christ did.

The call addressed to us today is a call to share in the Lord's passionate desire for the healing and restoration of all wounded, broken people in today's world.

It is a call to allow the unstoppable love of God to shine into and through our own woundedness so that we may, in our turn, reach out to others who need encouragement to get well.

Luke, the physician, made it clear that his purpose in writing his gospel account was to lead his reader(s) *to know Jesus Christ*.

His sequel to the gospel – the Acts of the Apostles – is there to help us see that the Jesus story continues in His disciples, in us.

May we be encouraged to long for and enhance, in whatever small way we can, the physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological well-being of our brothers and sisters – without forgetting our own well-being along the way.