

# Sunday Homily

## 23rd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

5 SEPTEMBER 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III

“He has done all things well.”

### Illustration

James was nine, the eldest of seven children who lived in a one-bedroom flat on a poor housing estate. His mother was alcoholic and his father, who came and went, was violent. James was “closed”. At school he would not take off his coat and he wore his hood over his head. He would not speak and when he communicated it was by kicking, spitting or punching. Though it was often difficult and frustrating, James’ teacher refused to give up on the possibility that James could be different. She believed that though she could do nothing about his home life, school could become a safe place where there was a real possibility of growth and hope.

There are many such children in our world who suffer not only from physical poverty but from a lack of emotional well-being and care. The media tell us so many stories of people who are suffering or in trouble that we can succumb to a degree of indifference; we shut our eyes and close our ears to their pain because we feel helpless to do anything about it.

### Gospel Teaching

Isaiah proclaims with confidence that God is coming and, when that time comes, “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed”. In our Gospel today that time has come. It begins with Mark describing the strange and circuitous route that Jesus has made to reach the place where he heals the man who has a double affliction with his hearing and his speech.

The reason for recording this unusual route, through pagan territories, is perhaps as an indicator of the length of time it would take for the disciples to be open to the message of Christ’s teaching. Jesus was not travelling alone. The disciples were walking with him, listening to him, watching and observing his behaviour as he gradually revealed his message to them. The message of Jesus was radically different from anything they had ever experienced, and so the ability to absorb all he shared with them was never going to happen overnight.

When they reach their destination, word has already spread and people are waiting for Jesus with a man whose condition symbolises the inability of many to make sense of the world around them. When Christ takes him away from the crowd he demonstrates a profound respect for the man’s dignity as a person;

and then through Christ's prayer and touch the man can at last hear and speak. The one who is healed discovers the link between what life has been and what life can be.

## Application

With James it took many weeks and months before his healing took place. As his teacher worked kindly and patiently with him, the barriers that James had built around himself started to fall away. Slowly James began to trust. His coat came off, he stopped grunting and he began to hear the teacher's gentle words of encouragement. As he allowed himself to relax, so his confidence began to grow. He started to smile and eventually his kicking and punching diminished. Within a year James' aggression had melted and he seemed to find hope and joy in living once more.

There is no one on this planet who is not in need of some healing. For some it will be physical healing, but for many it will be the healing that we need when we have been hurt by life. Sometimes we will be aware of what it is, but for some there will simply be something they find it hard to identify that causes a general feeling of distress or unhappiness. It may be a worry or an anxiety about the future or about a family member or friend. It may be because there are unresolved issues or conflicts that are gnawing away inside.

A question for us to reflect on in the coming week might be: "What is stopping me from being fully able to sing and leap with joy?" as Isaiah tells us will happen when people are released from what imprisons them. The story of Jesus healing the man who could not speak or hear is also a story for us. Can we allow ourselves to be healed of our impairment and become instruments of that healing love in our families and community? Let us pray that in the coming week the love that God has for us will be revealed and God will heal us in our need. Then we will be able to rejoice and say, "He has done all things well."

# Sunday Homily

## 24th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

12 SEPTEMBER 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV

“He began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously.”

### Illustration

Joe greeted his mother as she arrived home. “Mum, I’ve got two bits of good news, and only one bit of bad news,” he said. “The first bit of good news is that I checked the lottery results, and your numbers have won the jackpot! And the other bit of good news is that I gave that bag of old clothes to the charity collection, like you said.” “That’s great,” said Joe’s mother. “But what’s the bad news?” “Well,” said Joe, “the bad news is that I think your lottery ticket was in the pocket of that old pair of trousers you wanted to get rid of.”

### Gospel Teaching

In today’s Gospel there’s a good news/bad news story, but it’s certainly no joke. Throughout the first half of Mark’s Gospel everyone seems to be trying to discover who Jesus is. They’ve heard his powerful words, witnessed his mighty deeds, and they keep asking: “Who then is this?” The religious leaders say he’s in the power of Beelzebul, prince of devils. Many of the people suspect he might be a prophet. As for the disciples, they’re bewildered, now reacting with wonder and complete confidence in him, now questioning and unsure.

So the scene is set for the episode in Caesarea Philippi, way up in the north of the country. Jesus, alone with his closest friends, asks them who people think he is. They tell him the current views and then he asks: “Who do you say I am?” This is the beginning of the good news/bad news story. The good news is summed up in Peter’s dramatic reply: “You are the Christ.” At long last they’ve discovered the truth about Jesus: he is the long-awaited Messiah.

But immediately Jesus responds: “Say nothing of this to anyone.” Peter may have got the good news about Jesus but he’s not ready for the bad news; and it must have sounded like very bad news indeed. The disciples had discovered Jesus’ identity; now they are to discover his destiny, for “he began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death”.

They’d always thought of the Messiah as a powerful, victorious figure. But a Messiah destined to suffer, to be rejected, to be put to death? A defeated Messiah, a humiliated Messiah, a dead Messiah? Peter’s immediate reaction is to take

Jesus aside and argue with him. Jesus' response is to rebuke Peter in words that must have shaken him to the core: "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter is playing the devil's game, trying to dissuade Jesus from the path he must tread – a path that, humanly speaking, he would much rather avoid. Yet he goes forward boldly towards Jerusalem and certain death.

Alexander the Great, one of the greatest military leaders of all time, once made an eleven-day forced march with his troops. They were exhausted and almost dying of thirst. Some of the soldiers managed to collect water from a stream in a helmet and took it to their leader. After a moment's hesitation, Alexander handed the helmet back, its contents untouched. He wouldn't ask his men to do anything he wouldn't do himself. His action had an electrifying effect: with a leader like this, the soldiers could overcome weariness and thirst. Indeed, says the writer who recorded this incident, they looked upon themselves "as little less than immortal".

### Application

Today Jesus is putting the question to us: Who do you say I am? Do you accept me as your leader? I tell you the truth: being my true followers means you must deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me, though I assure you I will never ask you to do anything that I am not prepared to do. I know that following me can sometimes seem like a kind of dying. But through my death and resurrection, which you are celebrating at this Mass, I assure you that victory is yours.

Alexander's soldiers may have thought they were immortal; but if we are faithful followers of Jesus Christ we are immortal. Though we must die in this world, we are destined for a heavenly life of a richness and fullness we've never known before, life never marred by tears or sorrows, but a life of perfect joy and one that lasts for ever. This is no good news/bad news story. This is sheer good news – the best news the world has ever heard.

# Sunday Homily

## 25th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

19 SEPTEMBER 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

"If anyone wants to be first,  
he must make himself last of all and servant of all."

### Illustration

The fourteenth century was a time of frequent wars and bloodshed in the city states of Italy. It was so bad that a nobleman, Bernardo Tolomei, withdrew to an isolated mountain, Monte Oliveto, together with other like-minded men, to found a monastery. There, the community spent its time in prayer and religious life, far removed from the violence and evils of the world.

However, in 1348, the plague swept through the nearby city of Siena, and the community faced a choice of whether to stay in the security of their religious life or to come down from their mountain sanctuary. They decided they could not stand by, watching people suffer and die, without attempting in some way to alleviate their suffering. They came down from their monastery and, despite the risks to themselves, spent their time ministering to the sick and dying. More than eighty monks from the community were killed by the plague – a danger they had been only too aware of.

### Gospel Teaching

There is always a cost involved in service. There is always a need for us to come down from our "spiritual mountain". On the mountain that Jesus' disciples had just left, some of them had seen Jesus transfigured – they had glimpsed his divinity as God's Son. They had wanted to remain there on the mountain – to build three tents, three shrines to prolong that marvellous religious experience. But they had to come down – to leave that experience behind. Jesus wanted to explain to his disciples the nature of his mission, and that this would inevitably lead to him paying the cost of his life.

But the disciples are slow to understand, even though Jesus specifically takes them away from the crowds to teach them. And they are afraid to ask what he means. Perhaps they dare not ask because of the last time Jesus spoke of his impending death: Peter had protested that this must not happen, and, for his pains, Jesus had called him "Satan", accusing him of thinking as human beings think, not as God thinks. But perhaps the disciples simply prefer not to know what Jesus is talking about. He keeps referring to suffering and death, whereas they are obviously more interested in who is the greatest. They wonder which of them will get the important jobs, the key positions, in the kingdom, which they are sure Jesus, as the Messiah, is about to establish in Jerusalem.

The penny hasn't dropped about the true nature of discipleship. They think it is about glory, prestige and power. Jesus speaks simply in terms of service – and of the cost of service. It is as if the disciples are still up there on their religious mountain, refusing to come down to face the consequences – and the cost – of their faith in Christ.

## Application

What does Jesus' teaching about the need to be "servant of all" and to welcome little children mean for us today? In the society of Jesus' day, a child was someone of no legal status – in a sense, an unimportant person. And so anything done to or for a child was done simply for the sake of the child, without hope of reward or advantage. This was an opportunity to show genuine, disinterested love, unfeigned respect.

This is to be the hallmark of Christ's disciples: that we will love without hope of profit or reward; that we will respect the intrinsic dignity and worth of others, no matter what their position, power or wealth. God loves unconditionally. When we love like that, then we are not just loving like God, we are loving God. In welcoming those who are lowest and least important, we are – in a very real way – welcoming and worshipping God. We are coming down from our religious mountain and putting our faith into practice.

There is always a price to be paid for true service. Love is not cost-free, even though that is an illusion that we – like the disciples – like to maintain. But Christ's teaching about the need to be prepared to suffer and die also contains the promise that this road leads to the glory of the resurrection. Like the monks of Oliveto, we have to decide if we want the illusion of pure, unsullied religion, or whether we are ready to get our hands dirty in serving real people in real situations, no matter what the cost. That is the only way to offer real love to God, and the only way to enter real, eternal life.

# Sunday Homily

## 26th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

26 SEPTEMBER 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK II

“No one who works a miracle in my name  
is likely to speak evil of me.”

### Illustration

Where can we find good role models in our modern world? Whose words do we admire for their wisdom and hope? Whose actions impress us with their compassion?

These questions were asked of a group of young Catholics attending a retreat. Their replies surprised their teachers, who had been expecting them to focus on Catholic role models. Mother Teresa’s name was mentioned and her inspirational work in India caring for poor people in the Calcutta slums; also Pope John Paul II, who had faith that young people could play a positive role in Church and society. But many of the names were people who were not Catholic, indeed not even Christian.

For example, they talked of Martin Luther King, the African American Baptist leader prominent in the American civil rights movement. In 1964 he became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his commitment to end racial segregation without using violence. They mentioned Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian Hindu who believed in political change through non-violence; and the Dalai Lama, a Buddhist spiritual leader who promotes peace internationally. Pop stars and actors who support justice campaigns on cancelling international debt, fair trade and climate change also struck a chord with the young people.

Is it a matter of concern that young people look up to figures who, in Catholic terms, are not one of us, some of whom may even have little time for organised religion?

### Gospel Teaching

In today’s Gospel one phrase is repeated twice: “not one of us”. The apostle John is indignant that a man outside of their circle is casting out devils. “Because he was not one of us we tried to stop him,” John tells Jesus. But Jesus stuns the disciples by telling them that they have no monopoly on the healing power of Jesus. “Anyone who is not against us is for us,” he says. Shortly before this incident, the apostles themselves had been unsuccessful in trying to exorcise an unclean spirit from a young man. Now they were upset to see someone outside their circle being more successful.

From John's words, it appears that the apostles are trying to restrict Jesus' influence to their own small circle. They feel that the healing work of Jesus should be confined to them. They want something others don't have – perhaps to be honoured for it and to exercise power over others. Jesus makes clear that he does not support restricting God's power for good. Wherever evil is eradicated, the work has God's blessing.

This same message is given by Moses in today's Old Testament reading. Joshua contends that the Lord's spirit of prophecy can only enter those individuals who were "in the gathering" when that spirit was bestowed. Moses teaches that prophetic ministry can be exercised by anyone.

## Application

The mission of healing and saving humanity and the world is not the sole responsibility of the disciples, or, in today's world, of clergy, or of Catholics. It is a mission that is entrusted to everyone. Jesus does not want to close the circle around him. As long as healing and reconciliation are taking place, Jesus does not draw boundaries. His followers are called to cooperate with all those in the world who are promoting human dignity, assisting those who are vulnerable and taking responsibility for building a more just world.

This is why Christian agencies have worked with Muslim relief agencies in Pakistan to bring humanitarian aid to earthquake victims; why Pope John Paul II met with pop stars Bob Geldof and Bono in 1999 to support the campaign for the debts of poor countries to be cancelled; why Christian campaigners against nuclear weapons rub shoulders with secular anti-nuclear organisations. In many local areas, churches link with secular bodies and other faiths in soup runs and schemes for befriending vulnerable people.

Jesus asks a lot of us here. Be easy on others, give them the benefit of the doubt, assume that God is working in them. Do not seek the prestige of wealth, possessions and power for yourself, and refuse to exploit others. Instead, demand simplicity, honesty and repentance as you push towards spiritual growth. God's Spirit is within our family and neighbours, and perhaps we can learn to recognise the prophets among us and listen to them.

Perhaps too we can begin to recognise the prophet deep inside our own selves that cautions us to be kind and gracious, not to support the waging of war and not to hurt or diminish the least among us.