

Homily for 23 (B)

“He makes the deaf hear and the the dumb speak.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

While the French Circle was in Alsace a while ago, I met my first praying mantis. I know that it was a praying mantis thanks to Sheila Nettleton. It happened like this. Some of our rooms were towards the back of the property on which the hotel was situated, and we were next door to an overgrown patch of waste ground. The noise of crickets at night was extraordinary, I've never heard anything so small make quite so much noise, and it was obviously a big insect meeting place. Let me make it clear at once that I am not instinctively pro-insect and that I am inclined to resort to the rolled-up newspaper first and ask questions afterwards, however, on this occasion the insect in question was introduced to me by Sheila, and enjoyed her benevolent protection. It was very sweet. When she said something about a praying mantis I was a little concerned about whether it was praying with an 'a' or an 'e', but when I saw it, its little front legs together in an attitude of humble intercession, I was won over. They have tiny heads with big eyes, praying mantises, and they turn and look at you beseechingly.

Well, come the next morning, the praying mantises were on the way out. They were little drying remnants on the ground, in the last stages of going to join their ancestors. They came, they looked sweet, they went. I reflected that the average praying mantis doesn't have much time to have moral problems and to make bad choices. If it suffers from existential angst, it is very fleeting. We humans may well envy them. We have time to wander far astray from the path set out for us, and we are constantly beset by temptations and the possibility of radical sinfulness²;

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus the healer, proceeding in a great arc through Lebanon and entering Galilee to the north. He walked near the epicentres of contemporary conflict bringing healing and wholeness.

I thought, this morning that I would reflect, for a moment, on our own ability to heal. I am not talking really about the healing that God brings through the sacramental and prayer ministry of the Church. I am talking about something more simple. In our second reading, the combative James points out the sin and error involved in making judgements about people according to their apparent wealth. There is a double error here: firstly, that of preferring the wealthy for their wealth (James' main concern) and secondly, that of judging according to appearances only (very much the contrary of Jesus' example). I find it useful to

reflect how very much our simplest behaviour enriches or undermines those around us. What am I on about? Well, I suppose that I am suggesting that there were two sorts of healing that Jesus effected, one like the one in today's Gospel where a grave illness or disability was cured by the direct miraculous intervention of the Son of God, and there was the more global healing, the making whole, that took place when people came to Jesus, when they walked with him, when they heard him, when they opened their hearts to him. The point that I am making today, is a simple one. The first sort of healing is not always in our power, something of the second sort of healing always is. We Christians can spend too much time hoping for the big changes and neglecting what is in our power. We can neglect the simplest levels of healing that are well within our grasp.

We can welcome the poor and not despise them, the poor in material things, the poor in ability, the poor in spirit. We can be quick to recognize the vulnerability of others and seek to strengthen them rather than seek to manipulate them to our own advantage. We can make sure that our most mundane relationships are characterized by grace and courtesy, and that we respect others with the respect due to one who is made in the image of God. I am not suggesting that we are obliged to allow ourselves to be trampled on, but I am suggesting that we should be peacemakers and not warmongers, that we should be as quick to listen as to speak and that we should sincerely in our lives try to make room for the needs of those around us.

If you want to find an area of life where Christianity is palpably different from worldliness this is it. It is far too easy for us to come to mass, give money to some great cause, feel at peace with God and then go home to kick the cat. (Mine ran away some years ago). If you think that this simplest level of morality, the respect of others, is trivial, then you have some changing to do. By the simplest acts of kindness, of courtesy, of sympathy, of respect we can bring healing to a world where there is too much pain already. Of course we long for the great acts of God's healing power to be repeated in the world in which we live, we pray earnestly for the healing of the sick, for peace, for justice, for food for the hungry and for shelter for the needy, but these things are not replacements for the peace and healing that simple Godliness brings to a human life, they are the summit of the mountain of grace which we first ascend by transforming our lives at the simplest and most day to day level.

How many little sins within human relationships did it take to turn the land blessed by the footsteps of the Saviour as he walked from Tyre to Sidon and thence into Galilee into the battlefield of grotesque conflicts? Many very little sins leading to bigger ones, I suspect. It must not happen here, it must not

happen to us. We must be healers at every moment, and build a tapestry of grace in our lives and community which will help, in its small way, to heal the world.