

Lent Reflections on the Stained-Glass Windows



Holy Unction

Tuesday in the Fourth Week of Lent.



THOU HAST
DELIVERED MY
SOUL FROM
DEATH

ASSISTED BY D.D.
I.S.
1952

Reading: Psalm 116: 8-19

For thou hast delivered my soul from death,

mine eyes from tears, *and* my feet from falling.

I will walk before the Lord

in the land of the living.

I believed, therefore have I spoken:

I was greatly afflicted:

I said in my haste, All men *are* liars.

What shall I render unto the Lord

for all his benefits toward me?

I will take the cup of salvation,

and call upon the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows unto the Lord

now in the presence of all his people.

Precious in the sight of the Lord

is the death of his saints.

O Lord, truly I *am* thy servant;

I *am* thy servant, *and* the son of thine handmaid:

thou hast loosed my bonds.

I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving,

and will call upon the name of the Lord.

I will pay my vows unto the Lord

now in the presence of all his people,

in the courts of the Lord's house,

in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem.

Commentary

Throughout His ministry, Jesus was deeply concerned with the physical health of human bodies. In fact, when asked by the disciples of John the Baptist he listed healing as one indication of what he was about (Matt 11:4-5). Moreover, he sent his own disciples out with the same concern. In Mark 10:7-8 we read: “Accordingly, they set out and exhorted people to a change of heart; they also drove out many demons and cured many who were sick *anointing them with oil.*”

At the Chrism Mass on Maundy Thursday the oil of the sick is blessed by the Bishop who prays that it may become “a spiritual ointment for strengthening the temple of the living God; so that the Holy Spirit may dwell therein.” Thus, the sacrament of Holy Unction is concerned with physical health *and* with the spiritual bodily vitality that comes through the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is a sacrament that continues Christ’s mission to offer both healing and forgiveness of sins. For that reason, anointing should not only be reserved for those who are about to die as a way of preparing to meet their Maker with a clear conscience, but also, for those who are seriously ill and in need of healing. As Psalm 116 proclaims, “For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, *and* my feet from falling.”

This emphasis on healing is evident in the Epistle read out at the Chrism Mass. In it, St James discusses the various situations of the Christian life and it is normally seen as evidence of the practise of Holy Unction in the Early Church:

‘Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.’ (James 5:13-16)

Although physical recovery does not always occur, it is the Christian conviction that through prayers and anointing with oil God does sometimes ‘raise the sick person up’ to full physical health. However, if that doesn’t happen the saving work of the Holy Spirit is sure. As the theologian Andrew Davison notes: “The whole of the Christian journey is one of healing and this sacrament stands at the earthly end of this process; it ‘consummates the entire spiritual healing’, in which the other sacraments have also played their role.”

Finally, one of the key aspects of all the sacraments is that they build on what is ‘natural’ and ‘ordinary’. The sheer act of being with others when they are sick or dying is immensely comforting for the sick person and for their family and friends. Furthermore, the rite of anointing builds on the simple power of human touch by having the priest anoint the forehead and palms with oil. These are intimate parts of the body and communicate to the sick person that they are loved and that the Church is with them in their suffering. Endemic to the Christian faith is the understanding that we journey through life together and that includes up

until the point of death. As St Anthony of Egypt once said, “My life and my death are with my neighbour”. Holy Unction gives this Christian maxim sacramental expression.

Meditation

Turn your mind to all those whom you know are sick and in need of healing.

Think about how you can journey with them in their time of need.

Ask God to meet them in their suffering and to bring his healing.

When we anoint the sick it is worth praying for the needs of the world more generally; those who live in places of violence and disease where sickness and death are a daily reality. For those who are fleeing from these places.

Offer your prayers for the healing and forgiveness of the nations.

Prayer

Blessed are you, sovereign God, gentle and merciful.

Your anointed Son brought healing to those in weakness and distress; he broke the power of evil and set us free from sin and death that we might become partakers of his glory.

Remember in your mercy all for whom we pray;

in the fullness of time complete your gracious work

that we may be restored in your image, renewed in your love,

and for ever praise your great and holy name,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen**