

My Dear People,

Sooner or later it's likely to come to all of us. I refer, of course, to sickness, to illness and infirmity. If you've already been in this situation you'll know something of the effects. In addition to whatever physical suffering may be involved, there are other, perhaps less obvious, but equally painful consequences. Illness, particularly if prolonged, disrupts our lives. It compromises our self-determination. It restricts our freedom. It brings into sharp focus our need for others – for friends and family, for doctors and nurses, for helpers and carers. All in all, we find ourselves confronted with important truths about ourselves that in happier days we choose not to consider. Today's Gospel, on this the Sunday before we once again begin the Season of Lent, would have us consider those same important truths.

“How happy are you who are poor: yours is the Kingdom of God. Happy you who are hungry now: you shall be satisfied. Happy you who weep now: you shall laugh...” but we must be careful. It would be a serious mistake to think that Jesus is recommending poverty, starvation and grief, illness and infirmity. Much in his ministry is there to prove the opposite. Rather the “blessedness” that can come from such deprivation and suffering, arises from the enforced realisation that we are essentially people in need. Perhaps it's only when the consolations with which we surround ourselves are removed that we become receptive to deeper and richer realities. Not a few have discovered the importance of friendship in the midst of sickness – of the need for God in the midst of bereavement and loss – of the meaning of love in the fidelity of those who remain steadfast in one's adversity. Such discoveries are the commencement of a blessedness which Jesus assures us will come to completion at the end of time ... and that opens up a perspective on the coming Season.

The origin of the word “Lent” puts us in touch with Springtime, and that is how we should see it – a time for a new awakening, for discovery and new insight. IF we're encouraged to forgo some of our normal consolations, it isn't necessarily because they're bad for us, but rather because their absence, for a while, may enable us to reconnect with those deeper and richer realities. And today I want to suggest one particular agenda for the coming weeks. It takes us back to my opening paragraph.

Last Thursday, 11 February, we observed the 18th World Day of the Sick, and later this month I will be celebrating a Mass in Chester for Health Care Workers. Rooted in the ministry of Jesus Himself, we have a strong tradition of recognising the significance of illness, and of reaching out to those who are sick and infirm. I want to suggest that this Lent we revisit this tradition - that we create in every parish an opportunity to take stock of the care given to the sick and housebound, with a view to celebrating its achievements but also improving its quality. In particular I ask that consideration be given to how seriously we take provision for the celebration of the Sacrament of the Sick. It's so important that when a relative or neighbour falls seriously ill, whether at home or in hospital, the priest should be notified, so that the benefits of the Sacrament can be experienced.

All such care – practical and Sacramental - is so much more than what, at first sight, we might imagine. At a time when we are most vulnerable and open to new horizons, such care, as we have seen, can take the recipient well beyond the reception of kindly help. Not surprisingly the Holy Father called his Message for this year's World Day of the Sick "*The Church in the Service of Love for the Suffering*".

May our Lent this year, through whatever means we undertake, be a time to recognise afresh our need – for each other, for love, for God. And may we see our commitment to those most in need as nothing less than helping them to do likewise.

With a blessing and every good wish,

Brian

Bishop of Shrewsbury.

P.S. You might like to let your congregation know that the Mass for Health Care Workers to which I refer will be at St Columba's, Chester, on Sunday 28 February at 3pm.