

15 February 2015

Relaxing on Monday night watching some television, I saw the program 'World's worst place to be a pilot'. It wasn't a show for the faint-hearted or those scared of flying. It showed small planes taking off and landing in some of the most remote and dangerous parts of the world. One young pilot was taking supplies to a tiny village in Papua New Guinea. The village he arrived in was effectively a dirt track for the runway, the weather conditions appalling, the mountain ranges dangerous. Once he delivered his supplies, he was invited to visit a family who lived in a wooden hut. The entrance was so small that the young pilot had to literally crouch down to get in and simply couldn't stand up. Upon entering, there was a young family sitting around an open fire where the food is cooked. Life in this tiny village was very basic and essentially primitive. None of the luxuries and comforts we are used to, no separate bedrooms, no bathrooms, no fancy kitchen appliances, no television, no mobile phone, no ipad. It really looked as if these people lived in another world, on another planet, in a parallel universe that we would call 'normal'. These people live far on the periphery of life as we know it.

I mention this because in today's Gospel, Jesus heals a man who suffered from leprosy. It is a miracle story we know well. In the time of Jesus, people with leprosy were driven far from the community. They were excluded from normal community life for fear of spreading the disease. In fact, up until a few decades ago, people with leprosy were placed in special medical facilities because of the same fear of infecting others. As always, Jesus performs a miracle in order to call the people to faith. Jesus performs a miracle in order to stand in solidarity with the poor, the broken, the suffering and the marginalised. The sick are not to live 'on the edges' in some parallel universe, they are not outcasts to be excluded. They are to be included in the life of the community. Sickness already changes people's lives; Jesus reminds us that for his disciples they are to make things better and not make things worse for those who are sick and suffering. In reality, Jesus is working to change another mindset. Many people in his time thought that illness was due to something a person had done wrong, or perhaps the sin of their parents or some other relative. Through his ministry, Jesus makes clear that this is certainly not the case.

Most parish communities have a very strong ministry of visiting the sick in their homes, visiting residents of nursing homes, bringing communion to those no longer able to come to Sunday Mass and regular parish anointing Masses. All these ministries are about celebrating the healing grace of Jesus in our lives, witnessing to the fact that the sick and the frail are to be remembered and included rather than forgotten about and excluded. When illness and old age advance, people start to feel a burden on others and lose the freedom to enjoy the things that they used to do. It is precisely in these moments that the Church brings the power of prayer, the grace of the sacraments, celebrations that remind the sick and the frail that they are still an essential part of parish life.

The late Cardinal Martini of Milan was once visiting a local nursing home in Italy when a woman started to cry explaining that illness and frailty had robbed her of her freedom, that family and friends did not visit her as often, and that she felt worthless and a burden on others. Cardinal Martini looked her straight in the eyes and said, 'You have the most important ministry in the diocese. You need to pray for me that I will continue to be a good shepherd'. When a young volunteer was working with Mother Teresa in India, the teenager from America stated, 'Leprosy must be the worst disease'. Mother Teresa replied, 'No; the worst disease in the world is not being loved'.

By his ministry, Jesus reminds us that the excluded, the sick and the marginalised are loved by him. And as his disciples, we are called to do the same. This morning, we turn to the God of hope and love who brings us healing and peace in Jesus Christ his Son.