

Jesus in today’s Gospel story continues his prophetic ministry of bringing God’s kingdom into a bruised and broken world as he heals Simon Peter’s mother-in-law as well as “curing many who were sick with various diseases” and “driving out many demons” (Mk. 1:34). By his words and healing acts, Jesus fully inserts himself into our human condition, especially our experience of illness and suffering.

In the first reading, Job who has experienced the loss of his physical property (home, cattle), and children through a tragic death, cries out his pain to God. Job represents all of us. While addressing human illness and suffering, the Bible does not give a ready or definitive answer to the question “why.” What the Bible does reveal is that illness and suffering are not “punishments” meted out by a vengeful God to “teach” someone or a group of people a “lesson” for “bad behavior”, although some stories contained in the Bible often posit that people interpret them this way. Most importantly the Bible reveals a God who is not deaf to human suffering. The prophet known as second Isaiah speaks about an unnamed “suffering servant” who will come and willingly assume the fullness of our human condition, even experiencing people’s rejection, torture and death. Christians see this “servant” image fulfilled in Jesus. Even more, in God’s raising and glorifying the humanity of Jesus from the dead, God reveals the fullness of his redemptive plan to establish a transformed world and humanity in which illness, suffering, and death no longer have ultimate dominion. Today’s healings in the Gospel story show this redemptive work already beginning. Jesus does not engage in any sort of philosophical or theological discourse as to the “why” of suffering he encounters; he simply and powerfully confronts it; heals and conquers it as a sign of the kingdom already among us.

From its beginning the Church has continued this work of Jesus as witnessed by the healing miracles recorded in the book of the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of St. Paul. Eventually, the Church established hospitals and other forms social service for the sick and needy. Every illness healed, every form of suffering eliminated, or lessened, is a sign of the continuing in-breaking of God’s kingdom in our world. Today

in our country, for example, one out of every six persons served in a health care setting receives such care in a Catholic Church sponsored institution.

However, this traditional ministry of the church is facing an unprecedented threat in our country today. On January 20<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a stunning and extremely disappointing rule arising out of the Affordable Health Care Act of 2010 that almost every religious organization must pay for sterilization and contraceptive coverage (including abortion-causing drugs) in their health care insurance programs for employees. This rule changes what has been settled federal policy on exemptions for religious organizations. It rests on the appalling notion that the federal government can tell religious ministries what is religious. In this case, it says that a ministry is not religious if it serves or employs people who are not members of that religious body and so must offer services that even go against its beliefs. It qualifies for the exemption if its services and users are solely members of a particular church. Using this standard Jesus and his disciples would not have qualified for the exemption since they healed and served people of different faiths. This rule takes effect for religious employers in August 2013. We are being given a little over a year to change our conscience, our teaching, and our practice and conform to the government's standards! In addition to opposition from our country's bishops, many Catholic organizations oppose the new rule including the leaders of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Catholic Charities USA, the Catholic Health Association and Catholic Relief Services. This particular debate is not about whether contraception is moral. It is about how far the government should go in requiring religious organizations to pay for health care coverage that the organizations find immoral. The First Amendment to the US Constitution protects the "free exercise" rights of religion beyond the freedom to worship behind our own closed doors. Included in this weekend's Bulletin is an insert detailing how all of us can contact our elected federal legislators to urge them to repeal this unjust rule.

Like Jesus, we are called to heal the brokenhearted. Today we are challenged to advocate that our work in his name continue to be carried out by us in ways which do not violate our freedom, conscience, teaching or practice.