

**Fr. John Sassani**  
**Homily Given on February 5, 2006**  
**Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Liturgical Year B**

The Gospel today sets the backdrop for the Sacrament we are about to celebrate. Jesus and his disciples come home from the synagogue on Sabbath morning. Simon's mother-in-law is sick with a fever. It would be wrong to conclude that she has a little head cold – or that she is a drama queen. At a time when medicine was primitive and physicians were limited in both knowledge and technique, a fever was life-threatening. Jesus saw it as such. Breaking the Sabbath rest a second time, He heals the woman.

Peter's mother may then have simply done what she intended to do. But Mark describes her healing activity not as back to normal but as service. Her response to Christ is a service to him and to others.

The sick offer a service in the Church even as the Church offers the care of Christ in service to them. The Church, in the Sacrament of the Anointing, offers the service of Christ's healing power. The sick person offers the service of modeling vulnerability to Christ for us.

Several years ago, while I was living in Newton, I was called to Newton Wellesley Hospital for a person who needed to be anointed. When I arrived, I found a husband and wife in the room. The husband was the patient, the wife at his bedside. He was hospitalized for some kind of heart problem, but he also had Parkinson's disease – and he was very frightened. The tremor from his Parkinson's disease was exacerbated by his fear and he was thrashing. His wife did most of the talking but the man's face said everything that needed to be said: fear – anguish – pain – hopelessness – everything we hear Job describe in the first reading today.

After some conversation with the man and his wife, I asked the man if he would like to be anointed. He said yes – but his eyes cried out in prayer, "Lord, help me." As we prayed – and during the anointing – Christ saved him. He didn't cure him, but He saved him. The tremors subsided, the pain eased off his face, and he rested comfortably in his bed.

This man was vulnerable enough to be helped by Christ. In his vulnerable condition, Christ touched him and gave him well-being – which may have been quite temporary physically, but was long-lasting, at least in me, spiritually. What Christ did for the man had an impact on his wife and on the priest called to his bedside.

The Gospel today doesn't suggest that Jesus gave up healing to preach, but rather that healing would verify the preaching. The Gospel, the message of Christ, is about salvation. Christ's purpose in coming into the world is to rescue us from all the things that overwhelm us and threaten us with destruction. His acts of healing offer a clear indication of what the Gospel message promises.

Anyone who is sick and desires to be anointed by Christ today can do so, confident that He will help them. For the rest of us who seem healthy, Christ comes as usual in the Gospel to strengthen us – challenge us – call us to wholesome living. And in the Eucharist, Christ gives himself to all of us who are aching for his saving help – sick or healthy – so that we can know his love in the unique conditions that are ours and to help us follow Christ on the way.