

If you have ever been sick – and I guess we all have at some time – you will know that life suddenly becomes different and often difficult. Depending on how sick you are, you might end up spending a lot of time at the doctor, having tests, or maybe in hospital. But even if you just have a cold or the flu, you have no energy and probably want to spend time sleeping. There is no doubt that sickness changes life for everyone, just as ageing changes the way people might do some things. Freedom can be taken away, and people may lose control over parts of their life.

The Bible is full of scenes where people are sick, but it occurs to me that we never see Jesus dealing with his own sickness. I'm sure he must have been sick at some time. Of course, we do see him suffering. The thing that stands out when he suffers is that he hands his life over to his Father and trusts him. While don't see Jesus dealing with his own illness, he is certainly surrounded by sickness, and responds in his miracles of healing the sick. He is not afraid to touch the sick, even when it would have made him ritually impure according to the religious laws of his time. He always shows compassion. Let's think of that word "compassion" for a moment. It means to suffer with someone. I recall the words Jesus said on one occasion when someone approached him and asked for healing saying, "if you want to, you can cure me". Jesus replied, "of course I want to; be cured". Jesus' attitude is that sickness is not a good thing. Everyone wants to be well; and God wants people to be well.

That attitude has continued throughout the history of the Christian community. It goes back to the apostles being sent out by Jesus to cure the sick and announce the good news of the kingdom of God. From the earliest days, the Christian community established hospitals to care for the sick. These days, care for the sick is a normal part of a well-functioning society. We have doctors and nurses who use the best resources of modern science and modern medicine to treat the sick. We have dedicated people who care for the elderly, especially when they are no longer able to care for themselves. All of these activities, even if they are managed by the state, are at the core of the Christian message.

Today we are going to celebrate the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. What we do today is somewhat different to what health professionals do. Our sacramental practice does not replace the health care that others in the society give. Rather, our sacramental actions place us

before God. As we anoint those who are sick on the forehead and the hands, we pray that God will help them with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and that he will show them mercy and raise them up. I think there are two things to note about this prayer. The first is that the sacrament gives the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit connects them to Jesus so that they might experience his compassion and know that he is journeying with them. Our prayer is that the Holy Spirit will remain with the sick and give them strength and courage. The Holy Spirit also gives faith and hope. In times of sickness, a person's faith and hope can be tested. They may even be tempted to give up on God. This is probably a natural human reaction. But in the sacrament of anointing, we anoint the sick so that their faith may be strengthened during those difficult times.

The second thing about our prayer for the sick is that we pray that God will show them mercy and raise them up. If we think about it, this is a prayer that, being united with Jesus in his suffering, they will be united with him in his resurrection. This prayer reminds the sick person that just as at their baptism they were sacramentally raised up with Christ, so with the sacrament of anointing, they may keep their gaze on the risen Lord and are sustained by the grace of his resurrection.

There is something else we should remember today. Most of us are not going to be anointed, but we are all going to participate in this sacrament. We do this by praying for those who are sick – praying not just today but always. Sometimes pray is also expressed in action: in acts of care and support. The way a community cares for its sick members is a sign of its faithfulness to the Gospel that Jesus preached and lived.

Jesus kept his eye on the sick. As his followers, we are all called to keep our eye on the sick. They should be visible in our community. They become our teachers, showing us the meaning of faith and patience before God. Let's open our hearts to the gift that is given today in the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.