

Homily: 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B) 2021

I'm just back from a few days off, a chance for me to catch up with friends I've not seen for a couple of years, and get a bit of rest. As usual, I packed for every eventuality, only to find that there were one or two things I found I needed when I was away, meaning I had to go out and buy things anyway. On top of that, at least half the stuff I took I didn't actually need! So I was weighed down by baggage, but it was really unnecessary.

At the simplest level, that's the message that Jesus is giving the Apostles in today's Gospel. They are to take nothing with them for their journey, except a staff and the sandals which are already on their feet: no bread, no haversack, no money, no spare tunic. Having no sack means that they cannot even accept provisions from others or store up gifts: they have to live day by day, trusting in God to provide in each moment. But aside from material possessions, there is something else they take: another disciple. Jesus sends them out "in pairs": in this way they always have someone else to give them support and encouragement, but also someone else to consider. They must show love to each other, even before they meet the people they visit. And this means that there's another gift they carry with them: the presence of Jesus. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospel, "I will be there." So, unseen, Jesus walks with those who go out together to spread the Gospel.

Their mission is to preach repentance and to cast out unclean spirits: they are to drive out evil, in all its forms, to make space for God's reign, His Kingdom, to be established. And they also "anointed many sick people with oil and cured them." This is the only time in the Gospel that oil is used to heal the sick: our Lord works His miracles often just by a word, by touch or occasionally using some other physical sign. But the Apostles bring His grace by anointing the sick with oil. This is part of the origin of the sacrament of the sick, given to those who are seriously ill to ask for the Lord's grace and healing.

In former times this sacrament was often called "extreme unction" – an anointing given in the last stages of a person's life on earth. These days it can be given to anyone who has a serious illness, even if it's not life-threatening. Long-term debilitating illness, the frailty of old age, the suffering caused by a chronic condition of mind or body – any of these could be reasons for receiving the sacrament. It is also given before a large operation, to ask for healing and a good recovery. Whenever it is given, God is working to provide healing of body, mind and soul, and to grant whatever strength is needed to help the sick person in their trials.

It's also given to help the sick person unite their sufferings with those of Jesus on the cross. The word "Christ" literally means "anointed one", so whenever we are anointed in the sacraments, it is to make us Christ-like. In Baptism we are anointed because we are called to become His followers and model ourselves on Him. In Confirmation we are anointed because we receive His Spirit and share in His mission. A new bishop or priest is anointed because they are called to represent Christ in a special way, and model themselves on Him in the mission they undertake. And in the sacrament of the sick, a person is anointed to be

Christ-like in their suffering. This means seeking to put all their trust in God, offering up whatever suffering they must endure, uniting themselves with Jesus on the cross.

I've worked in hospitals for almost all of my 16 years as a priest. There, and in parishes, I've anointed by now thousands of people. I have often been surprised, even amazed, at the difference it makes. It can bring enormous comfort to the sick person; there have been times – and I don't claim this lightly – when people who were not expected to recover have begun to see an improvement. I can think of quite a few families who have commented on this. And there have been several times where I have been to see someone who has been at death's door for hours or even days, and they have quietly slipped from this world to the next while the anointing was taking place. When it is time for us to leave this life, the anointing is given to help us on our pilgrim way to the Father's House.

Last year, in the first few weeks of the pandemic, I remember many times being asked to go and see patients who were dying with Covid. At first, it was an unsettling, even frightening, experience. In those early days families were not allowed to be present, and often the patient was in a side room with no other staff there. I was told not to take any books or any non-essential items into the room, to reduce the risk of me bringing the virus out with me. So I would enter the room just wearing the essential PPE and with nothing else at all, except for a small piece of cotton wool soaked in the oil of the sick, blessed by the Bishop to bring God's grace to that person. "Take nothing for the journey", Jesus told His Apostles. Travel only with the essentials as you go out to bring my grace to those in need. In a way, circumstances taught me to live today's Gospel in a new way: to go to those in need unhindered by anything that wasn't essential, carrying with me only the presence of Christ, His grace, given through the sign of the blessed oil.

You may not be planning to go out today and to preach the Gospel to your neighbours. You will not be going to anoint a sick person with oil. But today's Gospel reminds us to consider: what is really necessary? What weighs me down as I seek to follow Jesus and to make Him known? It reminds us that the only truly essential things are love, and the presence of Jesus: if we have these, we have everything.

Fr Andrew

