

Homily given on the Feast of St Dymphna May 15th

by Deacon Tom Lambert

In the 7th Century, St Dymphna's father, a Celtic king, became deeply depressed over the death of his wife. Sadly, he came to see his daughter as the re-incarnation of his wife and tried to force her to marry him.

She fled to Belgium and the king followed her to Geel and flew into a rage and murdered her. There she was buried in a crypt beneath the local Church. Six Centuries later workmen uncovered the crypt and found the tomb made of a shining white stone only found hundreds of miles away from Geel. The town's people considered it a miracle that God had protected her in this way and soon reports of healing spread across the area, in particular healing of people with mental illness.

The site became a pilgrimage center. In the 13th Century, a new church was built, the Church of St Dymphna, a makeshift hospital was located at the Church and soon people were coming to find comfort and care for their loved ones with mental illness. The church soon was overwhelmed with patients and the parish priest began to ask people to take patients into their homes. In the way of life in the middle ages, this meant that the person accepted into the home was involved in the cooking, cleaning, farming and total way of life. For those who were too sick to work there was a hospital that the townspeople supported but most were cared for in the homes of the villagers. Thus what we know today as "foster care" began in 13th Century Geel.

One of the many remarkable things about this story is that during this period of time in Europe, people who exhibited symptoms of mental illness were believed to be possessed by demons. They were either locked away in prisons or banished from their homes and communities. Yet in Geel, truly a miracle of understanding and acceptance was taking place as people with mental illness were treated with dignity and compassion that enabled them to experience recovery from their illness.

It should also be noted that in the early 19th Century, Napoleon ordered that all people who were mentally ill be committed to asylums. Despite that order, the people of Geel refused to hand over the ones they considered to be part of their family.

Today in Geel, there are over 700 hundred families hosting over 800 individuals in their homes. For over 8 Centuries Geel has maintained a history of compassionate loving care for those society often ignores or shuns. A symbol of the town of Geel's outreach is a clock with no hands. This means that you have care for as long as you need!

Unfortunately, in the state of Illinois we are still living in a dark ages mentality. Our state is ranked among the worst in the country for our dysfunctional system care of people with mental illness. Families looking for help often run into a system that is underfunded and overwhelmed. While there are pockets of excellence, tragically the systemic problems are not being adequately addressed.

Sadly, The largest deliverer of services for people with mental illness is Cook County jail, (more people are treated for mental illness in prisons and jails than in all the public and private hospitals combined) and many people without insurance wind up living in nursing homes not equipped to handle their needs or are homeless on the streets. I often hear their stories as I welcome them at the parish where I serve.

I believe in miracles. God's grace works within us and we too can do great things. I see people like Jim and Shirley and Teresa Weber (sponsors of this celebration) and many others who, through God's grace, experience the healing power of God by using the circumstances of their lives to give honor to God by making the lives of others better.

This is the miracle' through, the intercession of St Dymphna, experienced in Geel. So today, as we ask St Dymphna to intercede for us, let us pray that we are able to experience the love and comfort of God and the grace to make the lives of others better by bringing them the comfort of a God who loves us and wants to walk with us. And let us pray and work for justice -- that people with mental illness and their families find a healthcare system that works for them - not against them.

Just as the paschal candle symbolizes the light of Christ. You and I are called to be the light of Christ to a world filled with the darkness of stigma and misunderstanding so that people with mental illness and their families can find hope and recovery.

May God bless you for all you do.