

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 1:40-45

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

REFLECTION 1: JESUS THE HEALER

When Jesus lived, leprosy was not just an incurable physical ailment; it amounted to social and religious death. In the New Testament there was no disease regarded with more terror and pity than leprosy. When Jesus sent out the Twelve he commanded them, 'Heal the sick, cleanse lepers' (Matt. 10:8). No other disease reduces a human being for many years to such a hideous wreck. The average course of the disease is nine years, and it ends in mental decay, coma and untimely death. Lepers were banished from the fellowship of others. They must dwell alone outside the camp and wear torn clothes, with shaven heads and a covering over their mouths. As they went, they had to give a warning of their polluted presence with the cry 'Unclean, unclean!'. In the Middle Ages lepers were often led into the local Church and there, the burial service was read over them – they were regarded as dead, yet still alive. There were completely banished from human society and totally shunned.

Our Gospel for today (Mark 1: 40-45) gives one of the most revealing pictures of Jesus. The leper had no right to have spoken to Jesus at all, we're just told that 'A leper came to him'. All barriers were down. Jesus places his power and authority at the service of the sick. He is moved with pity at the grief and misery of others. His compassion is not just skin-deep, rather it is an upheaval at the depths of his being, compassion being a communion in suffering. But the Lord 'stretched out his hand and touched the leper'. This gesture, along with words, illustrates the pity of Jesus, 'be made clean'. He understood that it was necessary for the leper to show himself to the priest to verify a cure and be integrated into the community from which he had been exiled. Jesus is not just a healer among others, he is the Saviour who gave his life to heal humankind from the disease of sin, illustrated by leprosy more than any other illness.

The healed leper cannot contain his joy. 'The man went away and began to publicise the whole matter'. Jesus is not the earthly Messiah the crowds were dreaming of. Even demons were looking to discredit him, pretending he was their leader. Jesus will emerge victorious, but only on the cross where a Roman centurion, seeing how he breathed his last cried out in an act of faith, 'Truly this man is the son of God'.

The lepers of today are the various outcasts and rejects of our society. They are those who live on the margins in subhuman conditions. In fact, each of us is leprous, each of us has a hidden uncleanness, which we need to reveal to Jesus, in order to obtain healing and wholeness to be readmitted into the society of the saved. Once we have been touched and cleansed, we must make known God's word and, following Jesus' example, welcome in their human dignity, those who were cast out or rejected.

REFLECTION 2:

'JE SUIS MARK EVANGELIST'

Some scholars regarded the Gospel of St. Mark of being of little significance. There are some reasons for this, such as the fact that it doesn't contain the gorgeous infancy narrative that makes up our present day Christmas story, or the magnificent drama of the final judgement, the dazzling parable of the Prodigal Son or the miraculous story of Lazarus exiting from the tomb. And so for a long time Mark was a neglected Gospel – that is until now. Now we recognise what was not so well understood before. Now we see the historical context in which this Gospel was written and how Mark's Gospel, unlike the other three, takes us straight into a world inhabited by demons and evil forces, in which Jesus is constantly in conflict. The evil forces were those of the Roman Empire. In fact scholars believe that his Gospel was written by Mark, a disciple of Peter, for the purpose of strengthening the faith of early Christians who were facing persecution. People at that time also believed that demonic spirits under Satan ruled the world. One of the main strategies of Mark's Gospel was to demonstrate two convictions – the Emperor of Rome was not the Lord of the Universe, Jesus was. Satan was undeniably strong, but Jesus was the 'Stronger One'.

From the beginning of Mark's Gospel to the end, Jesus is presented as Lord of the entire natural world, the wind, the skies and the seas – all are under his power. He is also the Lord, the Stronger One, when it comes to the ability to heal and illnesses that the world at the time had no answer for, especially leprosy.

This plunges us headlong into today's Gospel story. Leprosy was the most dreaded of all diseases, like Ebola today. Leprosy separated people from their families, their community and so constituted a 'living death'. It's remarkable that the leper, desperate to be healed does three things none of which were permitted by Jewish law. He approaches Jesus, kneels down in front of him and begs for him to be made clean. The leper treats Jesus as someone with divine power – a power much greater than Satan and the Emperor combined. What happens next is heart rending, one of the most vivid portraits in all the gospels of Jesus' humanity joined with his divinity. 'Moved with pity' Jesus does three things. He stretches out his hand, touches him and speaks directly to the leper: 'Be made clean'. Jesus, the stronger one, has ultimate power, even over the most dreaded diseases that no one before has ever been able to conquer. And yet he does it for 'the least of these'. This is why Mark closes this stunning story of healing power with these words, 'and the people kept coming to him from everywhere'. And they still do, especially when we, followers of Jesus, do the same. With deep compassion we stretch out our hands to the disadvantaged, touch them and lead them to a place of hope, healing and great joy.