

The Sixth Sunday of the Year B

A leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once, ^{and} said to him, "See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people." But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

[St Mark 1:40-45.]

Few afflictions in biblical times were more hideous and terrifying than that of leprosy. 'Leprosy' could refer to a variety of severe skin disorders, including actual leprosy (Hansen's disease), in which a bacterial infection causes the skin to ulcerate, resulting in oozing sores, loss of sensation, disfigurement, loss of limbs and occasionally blindness. In ancient times leprosy was incurable and its diagnosis virtually a death sentence. Beside the physical ravages, there was the total ostracism from human society imposed by the Law of Moses:

The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.

Even worse, a leper was regarded as ritually unclean and thus barred from entering the Temple, God's holy dwelling place, to participate in the worship offered by the Hebrew people. The Law of Moses could do nothing to help a leper; it could only protect the community from the spreading of the disease.

By approaching Jesus, this leper makes a bold move. Not only does he violate the strictures of the law, but he risks encountering the familiar reaction of horror and revulsion at the sight of a leper. He kneels, a sign of both supplication and reverence. His plea: "*If you will, you can make me clean*" shows his utter confidence in Jesus' power. This is more than a cry for help; it is rather a profession of faith. Significantly, he had not asked Jesus to heal him but to make him clean. His deepest desire is to be free once again to be able to participate in the worship of God's people.

At the sight of this wretched man, Jesus was moved with pity. He felt deeply for this man's predicament and, as the bystanders looked on with astonishment, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. Jesus is not defiled by leprosy; instead, his touch and word instantly make the man clean. The power of the holiness of our Lord is invincible. No defilement can contaminate him, he is able to remove defilement from all those who approach him in faith.

After telling the man to keep silent about his healing, presumably because Jesus did not want to encourage people to follow him just because of his healing miracles, our Lord instructed the man to go and show himself to the priest and make the customary offering for having been cleansed from leprosy. This would allow the man to re-enter society and participate once again in worship. This the cleansed leper obeyed. However, he did not obey the admonition to keep quiet with the result that Jesus became the object of peoples' fascination and could not openly enter a town. It is ironic that our Lord had taken on the leper's status. He had healed a man with leprosy at cost to himself.

Although leprosy has been wiped out in developed nations, we have to admit that there is an 'inner' leprosy, an inner uncleanness which is experienced by all fallen human beings. I'm thinking of that prejudice, selfishness, dishonesty and neglect of the needs of others that eats away at our humanity and makes us less than the people God calls us to be. It can make us hesitant in turning to God. But the leper in this story was bold in approaching Jesus and was richly rewarded. There is a lesson here for all of us, particularly as we stand at the edge of the beginning of this holy season of Lent. We must approach our Lord with confidence in his cleansing power. He will not be dismayed or contaminated by any human defilement. He willingly removes it by the power of his own holiness, restoring our communion with others and making us fully qualified to enter into God's presence.

Collect

O God, who has taught us that you abide in hearts that are just and true,
grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.