

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Leviticus 13:1-2,45-46 / Mark 1:40-45)
15.02.2015

It could be said that the five short verses we heard read in today's gospel passage describe for us the whole sense of Christ's saving work.

As we read our way through the gospels we see how Christ came into this world to heal the sick, to care for the wounded, to reconcile the alienated, to reach out to the ostracised, to reintegrate all those cut off from the community.

It is all this that we see Jesus do in the story of the healing of the leper which we are invited to consider this morning.

The Hebrews considered leprosy to be largely an incurable and highly contagious disease.

We heard in the extract read from the Book of Leviticus what the Jewish Law had to say about the treatment to be meted out to lepers. They were to be kept apart, held at a distance, deemed unclean.

The section from Book of the Law from which our first reading is taken – chapters 13 to 15 of Leviticus – detailed many health regulations which excluded Israelites suffering from certain ills, or other causes of uncleanness, from associating with the wider community. It imposed a ban on those considered to be defiled and ritually unclean. They were excluded from the fellowship. Lepers and prostitutes were put into the same category.

Leprosy was the worst possible ill that could possibly befall a person
It was seen as a sign of God's displeasure and considered as a punishment for sin.

Lepers themselves - like those around them - would have thought that their ill had been inflicted upon them because they had done something terribly wrong.

(I am struck to hear some people in our own day and age reason in like manner when certain ills befall them. How many innocent people I have heard say: *Father, I must have done something wrong for this to have happened to me.* This kind of reasoning says a lot to us about how people - and maybe even we ourselves - still see and understand God's ways on occasion. Even after the insight into God's mind and heart which has been given to us through the revelation of Jesus-Christ, people can think in terms of a vindictive, punishing God!)

Someone suffering from leprosy was an untouchable.
If anyone came into contact with such a person they were contaminated.

Significantly, if a leper was cured of leprosy by the grace of God - and this would have been a rare occurrence - they had to offer a sacrifice of expiation: that is, a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. This regulation underscores for us the link made between leprosy and sin.

I am struck by those Scripture texts which though they do not actually name the ill of leprosy seem to hint at its symptoms when they describe for us the fate of anyone considered to be accursed by God.

I think of what we read in the Book of Job, for example, which recounts for us the story of a just man subjected to trials, or again, I think of what we read in the Book of Isaiah in the Suffering Servant prophecies which the tradition has always seen as fulfilled in the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These texts describe the pain and suffering endured by the just man in terms akin to that of one suffering from the ill - indeed, the curse - of leprosy.

In the gospel story we read this morning it is surely significant that the leper himself dares to come out of the cut-off place where the Law of the Book of Leviticus would have held him confined.

We are told: *A man with leprosy came up to Jesus.*

This excluded man approached Jesus!

Lepers were to approach no one.

Indeed, they were to call out *unclean, unclean* to keep those who ignored their state at bay.

So, the leper in today's gospel story came out of his *place apart*.

The response of Jesus is all the more striking, given the instructions of the Law.

Jesus touched the leper.

Jesus ran the risk of contamination.

We could say that Jesus identified Himself with the suffering man's ill by daring to touch him.

This exchange of touch is really significant.

Jesus takes on the leper's impurity and the leper is made clean through contact with the Sinless One.

It is as if the goodness, the wholesomeness, the holiness, of Jesus is also contagious.

It is!

Sinful, broken, wounded, defiled men and women (and that is all of us) are made whole and holy through contact with Christ.

The apostle Paul dares to speak of *the sinless One having been made sin for our sakes so that we might be made righteous.*

Today's gospel story illustrates Paul's words for us. It shows us what happens when Christ takes humanity's sin upon Himself: wounded, broken people are healed and made whole.

In all the encounters between Jesus and the suffering people He meets with in His ministry the words spoken between them are deeply significant.

So, let us listen to what the leper said to Jesus when he approached Him.

The suffering man said to Jesus: *If you choose, if you want to, You can make me clean.*

This insistence upon Jesus' will, His positive choice to be benevolent, is very important for us to grasp.

The whole of the New Testament tells us that God's will (and therefore that of Jesus-Christ) is that all people should be saved.

God so loved the world that He sent His Son into the world so that all people might be saved. (John 3:16)

These words of John's gospel are well-known to all of us. They are repeated often enough over the airwaves and on billboards, in tracts and in homilies to make it impossible for any of us to be able to ignore them.

But other words from John's gospel also come to mind. I think of Jesus' words recorded for us in chapter 6 of John's gospel: *This is the will of the One who sent me that I lose not one of those He has confided to me. (John 6:39)*

Again and again, it is illustrated for us in the gospel accounts how Jesus' mission has Him go after those on the margins, those held at a distance, those who have strayed, those who have cut themselves off from the community and those whom the community has ostracised.

Jesus' response to the leper: *Of course, I want to, I do choose to make you clean* accords with what He states in so many ways and which is resumed in these well-known words: *It is for the sick, those who need the doctor, that I have come into the world.*

Christ's mission is to those who stand in need of redemption.

Another point that Jesus makes over and over again in the gospels - not only in word, but also in action - is that the Law must go beyond stark justice to find its fulfilment in redemptive love.

It is not that Jesus goes against the Law. It is that He goes beyond it!

What we see take place in the encounter of Jesus with the leper is an illustration of the whole mystery of His incarnation.

It is nothing less than what the tradition calls *the marvellous exchange* between God and humanity. Jesus transmits/exchanges His holiness with the leper, whose impurity He takes upon Himself. Jesus' holiness cancels out the leper's defilement.

The outset of Jesus' ministry – His baptism in the Jordan – sees Him mingle with the unrighteous who went to receive John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins. On Jordan's banks we see Jesus hold Himself in the ranks of those who recognised themselves to be sinners and/or were deemed to be such by others. The end of His earthly life sees Jesus hang between two men condemned to death for just cause. And so, the beginning and at the end of Christ's earthly ministry sees Him align Himself with the unrighteous.

Jesus always identifies Himself with the outcasts, those excluded.

In the epistle to the Hebrews we read: *That is why Jesus suffered outside the city, where His blood washed our sins away.*

The same epistle goes on to bid us to follow Jesus' example: *So let us go out to Him beyond the city walls* (that is, outside the interests of this world, being willing to be despised), *to suffer with Him there* (in all those who are ostracised), *bearing His shame.* (Hebrews 13)

Outside the city, beyond the camp. This is where the lepers were obliged to live.

It is surely significant that Mark ends his account of the healing of the leper with the note that *Jesus Himself could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed in the country; and people came to Jesus from every quarter.*

In the place of exclusion, the place of humiliation, *outside the city walls* at Golgotha Jesus hung upon the cross.

It is to that place that we are attracted today when we are overcome by our weight of guilt and shame, when we are suffering pain and agony.

We look to the cross, we cling to it, seeing it as the place where we can find consolation and hope.

Another insight from John's gospel comes to mind.

I think of the words Jesus spoke in John 12: *When I am lifted up* (in John's gospel being lifted up refers to the cross) *I will draw all people to myself.*

What attracted broken, wounded people to Jesus was the fact that they could see how willing He

always was to draw alongside those who were outcast and in need.

As Church we will only ever have an impact if we are seen to display Christlike qualities of compassion and loving kindness, a readiness to heal and restore, to reconcile and reintegrate the marginalised.

Pope Francis is forever drawing to our attention the need for us Christians to display in very concrete ways that we are close to those who in need of mercy and ready to manifest the Lord's gentle compassionate care to those in need of it.

In his book *The Broken Body* Jean Vanier remarked many years ago: *Rejected people are sick and tired of 'good' and 'generous' people, of people who claim to be Christians, of people who come to them on their pedestal of pride and power to do them good.*

So what is that people are waiting for?

I would say that what they are waiting for are people who come to them aware of their own brokenness, poverty and shame and who, therefore, will approach them with understanding and respect.

In Benedict's *Rule for Monks* it is surely significant that the spiritual father is seen to be one who is aware of his own wounds and weaknesses. It is this self-awareness, the consciousness of his own need for God's mercy, which equips him for his ministry.

Benedict says: *Having learned to deal with his own wounds, he is capable of helping others deal with theirs.*

Pope Francis answered the call of the cardinal electors to serve as Bishop of Rome by saying that it was as one aware that he was a sinner that he accepted their call to exercise the ministry they confided to him.

Such self-awareness is required of all of us.

It is only such self-awareness that will ever equip any of us to exercise an effective ministry of mercy and compassion and make it possible for us to be positively effective as we reach out to others.

We must meet brokenness, suffering and even sin with respect.

Just think of all those gospel scenes which show Jesus approaching broken, wounded, suffering, sinful humanity with loving respect, with a desire to heal, reconcile, reintegrate, restore and make whole.

It is clear from His life that Jesus feels most at home with the poor, the needy, those in pain, those covered in shame - including many people His own disciples might have preferred not to see Him mingle with or welcome. So much so, that we can speak of His *option for the poor and for the sinner*; His *preferential love* for them.

It is to such people that the Lord sends us His Church today: *Go to the highways and the byways and invite the poor, the lame, the sick and the blind.*

He says to us what He said to His disciples who wanted to shield Him from those who came to Him to touch Him and to be touched by Him: *Do not turn them away.*

We must ask ourselves, in the light of Jesus' words and example: Who are we to exclude? Who are we to turn anyone away?

How dare we do so!

Jesus reached out His hand and touched the leper (...) Immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean.

These words remind me of a line from Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* - an exhortation addressed to us both to challenge our stand-offish attitudes and to encourage us to reach to others to display to them something of God's mercy and compassion revealed in the *Joy of the Gospel*.

I will conclude this reflection with this little line from *Evangelii Gaudium*: **Everyone needs to be touched** ... *Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings.*

Are we ready to reach out to and touch others, the lepers of our own day and age, the marginalised, the ostracised, the alienated?

Are we ready to allow ourselves to be touched?

We must go out to others. We must reach out to those on the fringes of humanity and dare to touch them.

And, we must also dare to welcome those held at a distance when they dare to do as the leper did in today's gospel story: when they dare to approach us in their leprous state longing for a sign of comfort and compassion.