

Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus experiencing a mixture of compassion and anger - compassion for the poor man suspected of 'leprosy', and anger at the system that treated him so badly. As the First Reading makes clear, the scaly skin condition (incorrectly translated 'leprosy') was not just another physical ailment. The colouring and condition of the skin reminded people of death and so was subject to a taboo that caused people, irrationally, to treat a person with the condition as a social outcast. A 'leper' did not belong. He not only had no hope of a cure; he had no hope of enjoying ordinary human companionship, no hope of receiving love, no hope of being accepted as a person. He had to say goodbye to his home and loved ones. He had to, in the words of the Gospel, 'stay outside in places where nobody lived.' This is the first point to notice. It will not be difficult to find the equivalent in our society - those who, for one reason or another, are categorised by their race, colour, social class, looks, health, age, sex - but not treated as persons. This is perhaps particularly the case in our own country, where political rhetoric demonises people seeking asylum here as behaving illegally, and so should be dumped somewhere, anywhere out of sight.

The second point to note (and this is also clear from the First Reading) is that a 'leper' was treated in this way *in God's name*. When we concluded the reading from Leviticus we said: 'The Word of the Lord', and responded: 'Thanks be to God'. What is God saying? What are we thanking God for? A leper would find little hope here from God. Furthermore, no matter how personally compassionate people might feel towards him, they understood that they had no choice but to obey God's instructions as inscribed in the Law. They, too, were taught that the words of Scripture were the words of God and so since it was God who was telling them not to touch a leper but to cast him out of the camp, they obediently did what they were told. How many people today feel ostracised from the Christian community because, like the leper, they find themselves in situations over which they have little or no control because they are told, or believe, that this is God's will for them?

That the prevailing understanding of Leviticus was wrong is made abundantly clear by Jesus. Sure, the passage does reveal something about God's holiness and of the need for purification if we are to be in God's presence. The authors of Scripture are inspired by God, but God's inspiration was imperfectly understood by limited, imperfect human beings. The words of Scripture are perhaps best described as a human response to God's self-revelation. God communicates God's self and God's will in prayer, and the inspired writer expresses what he sees in words that necessarily have all the limits of language, as well as the necessary limits of the inspired writer. The authors of Leviticus drew unwarranted conclusions from their understanding of God's purity: they thought that this meant that lepers (and other classes of people) had to be separated from the assembly. Jesus, who is the perfect revelation of God's word, shows us that the solution is not casting the lepers out but a love that heals and purifies. This is just one more example of the danger of reading Scriptural texts literally without recognising their imperfection and seeing them in the light of the fuller revelation given by Jesus. How many terrible things have been done in God's name over the centuries by people who failed to distinguish what is from God and what is human imperfection in the sacred Scriptures. We now know to look for the beauty and truth in the Scriptures, while acknowledging human limitation and imperfection. The dreadful behaviour we witness from jihadist Islamists encourages us to pray that Moslems, too, will learn to see the human limits of the Qur'an, while

being inspired by the beauty and truth that is found in their sacred texts.

We are told that the leper approached Jesus. This already tells us a lot about Jesus. What kind of man must he have been for a leper to have dared to approach him, breaking all conventions (including the 'word of God' as understood by all his contemporaries), and risking the ire of the crowd? Something in the leper tells him that Jesus can cure him. Did Jesus know this prior to this encounter? Who knows? How do we come to know ourselves except through the responses of others? Lepers were not new to Jesus. He would have come across them as a boy and as a young man, and not known what to do other than to weep for them. But now, something in this man's eyes and in his manner, especially the absolute trust, stirs Jesus deeply.

Jesus knows that the Law, at its best, recognises God to be 'merciful and gracious ... abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exodus 34:6. See also Hosea 2:19). Moved by the Spirit of God who hears the cry of the poor (Job 34:28), Jesus reaches out to the leper, and, bypassing the injunctions of Leviticus, embraces him with his healing touch. Seeing the horror on the faces of those around him, Jesus is overwhelmed with righteous anger at their failure to believe in God's compassion. On another occasion Jesus exclaimed: "You have a fine way of rejecting the commands of God by holding to your own traditions'(Mark 7:9).

Jesus acted with such compassion because he knew what it was like to be an outsider. He lived with the poor, felt with them, was one of them. He knew that to love someone we must go out to them; we must be willing to take their place. So often we 'love' people till it hurts and then we stop. So often we 'help' people, but up to a point. So often we assist others from our point of view and only so long as it does not interfere radically with our priorities. In this scene with the leper, Jesus shows us the compassion of God. The kind of love Jesus demonstrates here is the kind of love that will take him to the cross. He was not willing to draw the line, but loved even to the emptying of himself.

Insofar as we are 'lepers' (and who is not?), this scene should fill us with hope. Jesus wants to cure us ('Of course I want to'). He is willing to embrace us with our leprosy. No law of Church or State will stand in the way of his compassion. Insofar as we seriously wish to be his disciples, this scene shows us also how we are to relate to others.

The leper is welcomed back into the community, while Jesus is forced to take the place once occupied by the leper. Mark tells us that "Jesus was no longer able to go openly into a town, but has to stay outside in the uninhabited countryside'. Mark is telling us that the only real compassion is that which is willing to share the condition of the oppressed. You cannot help me unless you are willing to sit with me and share my pain and my shame. You can heal me only if you love me enough to be with me whatever my condition. There is no other way.

He concludes this moving and powerful scene by telling us that no Law can stop the spread of the gospel. Jesus refused to obey the Law when it required of him that he restrain the compassion of God that moved his heart. The people learned from him, and they, too, learned not to be contained by the words of the Law. They refused to stay away from him, for they were learning a new way of looking upon God: a way that broke through all the man-made limits of the Law, and that moved them, as it had moved the leper, to dare to seek healing from the one who revealed to them a God in whom their hearts could believe.

Who of us does not need healing? Who of us does not know the feeling of being alone, isolated from others, a 'leper' and an outcast? Firstly, we must ask ourselves do we really want to be healed? And secondly, can we, like this simple man, dare to approach Jesus and say to him: 'If you want to, you can cleanse me (= welcome me into the realm of the holy)', believing that he does want to and will not fail to hear our cry? This is not to say that we will necessarily obtain the healing that we think we need. But we can be certain that God who knows us will grace us with whatever healing will release us to be more closely united to God's Son, Jesus, and more able to love. To know that is enough. So let us, like children, dare to ask for whatever we desire, so long as we do so trusting that God knows best what is good for us.

Furthermore, let us learn from Jesus how to welcome those who feel themselves to be outcasts. Who knows what miracles of healing are possible if we are willing to share each other's pain?