

HOMILY FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Leviticus is a book of laws and rules which were managed by the priests. Laws had a religious purpose hence, the priest was the only one who could declare when a person was cured of a skin disease, some of which were very contagious. Although many obviously recovered from these skin diseases, since the priest could allow people back into the community, leprosy was incurable.

Every person with a skin disease had to be treated as though he or she had leprosy. The person with a skin disease had to tear his clothing and disorder his hair as a sign of infection and cry, "Unclean, unclean" if someone came near. A diseased person had to live outside the camp and we know that leper colonies were not uncommon. From a religious point of view, this person may just as well have been crying out, "I am a sinner. I am a sinner."

Such was the outcome of these people sent into quarantine and locked down in their colonies. They weren't even permitted to mingle with others or celebrate at the worship gatherings. They were completely in isolation. It all sounds very familiar, doesn't it?

Dr Google will tell us that these days, leprosy is curable with multi-drug therapy. It is not contagious through touch unless an open wound meets an open wound. It is spread after long term exposure to droplet infection. Yet, throughout history, lepers have been considered untouchable.

So, the first reading becomes an introduction to the Gospel reading where Jesus touches the leper and heals him. It should also be noted that, in the Old Testament, such a miracle is a sure sign that the Messiah has come.

It was unusual for a leper to approach anyone as this leper approached Jesus. What is even more unusual and doesn't happen elsewhere in the Gospels, is that the person wanting healing says, "If you want to, you can cure me." This is no ordinary healing. This man is not simply saying he is sick. He is saying, "You know what I am. I am a reject. I am a sinner. Will you restore me?"

It is because he comes that Jesus heals him. He wasn't healed before he came. He came and he was healed. I sometimes wonder that we as a Church, have lived as though a person has to be healed before he or she can come to us. We can be uncomfortable with those who do not appear to be living according to our Church's teachings. Yet, Jesus shows us again and again that through their contact with him, people's lives are changed and we, of all people should know that the most significant contact people can have with Jesus is here – meeting Christ in his Body, the Church; meeting Christ who is present in the Eucharist because we gather.

Archbishop Mark mentioned last weekend in his televised homily, quoting Pope Francis, that the church is like a field hospital. People should come, not because they're well but, because they're sick. It is too easy to reject people because they do not appear to be living according to our teachings but, how will they ever see the value of those teachings if they don't come and see them witnessed in us and what they mean to us. We are not to be judgmental. We are to make contact – to touch. And, why are we waiting for them to come here when we could be inviting them and welcoming them when we're out there?

This is Paul's point in the second reading. Do everything for the glory of God and the glory of God is the cross. Work for what is advantageous for others – in other words, do not condemn.

The final point from the Gospel reading is that Jesus tried to go into isolation because the cured man could not hold his tongue. This is a very strong theme in Mark's Gospel that Jesus is not simply seen as a man of miracles. Even the Old Testament had those but, Jesus is so much more.

For Mark, the ultimate miracle of Jesus is the cross – the end of sin and the embracing of all humanity in its brokenness and sickness.

The Christian community has had a reputation for driving away those it considers unworthy. Jesus is always about bringing the sinner into contact. The cross is the miracle and we are the people who are signed with the cross