

Commentary for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary time 2024

Leprosy was one of the most dreaded diseases of the ancient world. However, it may come as a surprise to know that the word "leprosy" in the bible usually didn't refer to Hansen's disease. From what we can see in Leviticus chapters 13 and 14, the word covered a variety of skin diseases, including the different forms of psoriasis, lupus, ringworm, favus and vitiligo (The late Michael Jackson was afflicted with vitiligo). All these conditions were seen a punishment by God and made their victims unclean. They entailed segregation but not complete isolation from others. In the bible there are no references to leper colonies. While lepers did have dealings with other people, they had to acknowledge that they were suffering from the dreaded disease by wearing ragged clothing, looking unkempt and crying, "Unclean, unclean" (Lev 13:45). In biblical times people who suffered from leprosy had three interrelated problems.

- Firstly, there were the undesirable physical effects of the disease.
- Secondly, there were social effects in so far as the victims had to keep their distance from other people.
- Thirdly, there was a spiritual stigma associated with leprosy. People saw it as a curse from God, a punishment for serious sin.

When Jesus met with the man suffering from leprosy, he reacted with what could be referred to as indignant compassion. Jesus didn't judge by appearances. He had a deep sense of empathy for the poor man who was suffering so much. He was vividly aware of the innermost value of the leper, as a child of God. At the same time, he felt angry because the leprosy was stunting the leper's potential. There is reason to think that Jesus saw the shadow of the devil's influence in the background. When the man asked Jesus if he wanted to help him, Jesus responded: "Of course I want to, be clean." Joseph Schmid's translation of the Gospel reads, "Then Jesus *in his anger* stretched out his hand to him, touched him, and said to him: I will - be clean." In other words, because Jesus was affirming the man's dignity, he was angrily resisting the disease and the influence of the devil which were afflicting him. Knowing that his antagonism to the leprosy was a share in the mind, heart and will of God his Father, Jesus uttered a compassionate word of command, and the man was healed. The prophetic words, "I am willing" were inspiring. I'm quite sure that they transformed the man's hesitant faith, into trust of an expectant kind. As St Paul said: "Faith comes from hearing, and that means, hearing the word of Christ" (Rm 10:17). The leper had heard that living word and so he had no more doubts. His healing would be

accomplished because Is 55:11 promises that God's word does not return to God without achieving the purpose for which it is sent. Then we are told that Jesus "stretched out his hand, touched him and said to him...be cleansed. And at once the skin disease left him and he was healed."

In Jewish theology leprosy was the archetypal symbol of sin. The deterioration of the physical body was a metaphor for the inner corruption of the soul. To the rabbis the cure of a leper was as difficult as raising a person from the dead. So, the miraculous cleansing of the disease was an outward sign of inner cleansing and because of that fact, of the coming of the messianic age. Jesus adverted to this when the imprisoned John the Baptist asked him through a messenger: "Are you he who is to come (i.e. the Messiah)?" Jesus replied: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, *the lepers are cleansed*" (Mt 11:5-6). It would seem that in recounting this, the first miracle Jesus performed, Mark was saying that leprosy was a symbol of sin. When Jesus cured the leper the healing implied that if Jesus had lifted the effects of sin he had also removed the curse of sin. The gospel concludes with Jesus telling the leper to have his cure verified by the temple authorities in accordance with the instructions contained in Lev 14:1-32. Jesus testified, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt 5:17).