

6th Sunday of Year B: Negative: lepers' treatment; Positive: God's glory. 1st Reading: Leviticus 13:1-2+44-46: Old Testament treatment of lepers; 2nd Reading: 1 Cor 10:31-11:1: Do everything with love & for God's glory. Gospel: Mark 1:40-45: Jesus touches a leper – but still keeps an old rule....

At first sight, this weekend's first reading & gospel are about leprosy, and so seem totally irrelevant to how we live today. However, many may remember the public reaction to AIDS in the 1980's. The atmosphere then was not too unlike the ancient treatment of lepers: a mixture of moral and physical disgust; but, above all, a fear of contagion. More recently, the policies of both the UK & Scottish governments in regard to the corona-virus have been the subject of a very public inquiry. We all remember what happened before everyone had been vaccinated: isolation of the elderly & vulnerable; schools closed; separation of those infected. That awful time was not totally unlike what happened 2000 years ago. Physical conditions change, but human nature rarely does.

Can we take the gospel first? As in recent weeks, this Sunday's deals with Jesus' early ministry in Galilee; much of the detail will have come from St Peter, who inspired St Mark to write it. A leper approached Jesus and knelt before him – a symbol of humility and worship – and said, *"If you want to, you can cure me."* That shows both faith in Jesus' power, and a lack of presumption that Jesus would want to do it. (A lesson for us when we pray for something...?) But it also shows that this leper appreciated his place (or lack of it) in ancient society: he was "dirty" – an outcast. Jesus' reaction was amazing: *"Of course I want to!"* There is a slight edge, I think, to that reply. Mark tells us that Jesus "felt sorry" for the man, so perhaps Jesus was annoyed at the situation the leper found himself in (through no fault of his own) and sorry for his plight. I wonder anyone shares my feelings when seeing the endless adverts on daytime TV about sick & poor children in Africa? I have mentioned this issue before in these notes: sympathy (and some guilt) about their suffering, plus anger at governments that have wasted billions of pounds of aid money. Anyway, in the gospel account, Jesus touched the man (a risky thing to do then) and cured him.

But the story does not end there. Jesus told the man to go through the old Jewish ritual of being examined by a priest and making an offering of thanksgiving – thus allowing him to return to social life. Jesus respected many of the rules of the society in which he lived. Then he added: *"Mind you say nothing to anyone..."* As I wrote last week, Jesus was aware that his work in Galilee was making him into a "super-man" – a bit of a freak, with huge crowds following him, anxious to witness more miracles. He wanted his status as Messiah to be more discrete and less ostentatious. It was a forlorn hope: the man told the whole world and his wife. Jesus' life became yet more chaotic. This bit of St Mark's Gospel shows Jesus as human as well as divine: his emotional state is very believable. He was not like a plaster-cast statue – he had feelings like us, and sometimes he reacted surprisingly strongly to events.

If we move to the first reading, from the Old Testament law-book Leviticus, we see that, even then, it was possible to recover from leprosy. Although the disease was awful (lepers were kept away from other people), it was not a death-sentence. The process of being certified “clean” involved an examination, then the offering in thanksgiving. The Church down the centuries has interpreted leprosy as a symbol of sin. If you have a missal, try reading the responsorial psalm after the first reading. If using a Bible, this psalm is 31 in RC Bibles and 32 in others. It is about the relief we can feel from admitting guilt; old-style Catholics got this after confessing serious sins. *“Now I have acknowledged my sins; my guilt I did not hide. I said, ‘I will confess my offence to the Lord’, and you, Lord, have forgiven the guilt of my sin.”* I think that the Church has put this psalm here to compare ‘leprosy’ in the old days to alienation from God in the modern world. Going back to God offers spiritually the same sense of relief that the ex-leper got from being taken back into society.

On a much happier note, St Paul writes in this weekend’s 2nd reading: *“Whatever you eat or drink; whatever you do at all, do it for the glory of God.”* (I am not sure that the modern medical establishment would approve of St Paul here, as they seem to say that if something is enjoyable, then it must be bad for our weight, or liver, or heart, or all three...) More seriously, I think that Paul means that we should use the good things of life in a way that glorifies God, their maker. This is not to argue for sin & softness, but to realise that there is much that we ordinary people can enjoy, and which enhances our lives. Perhaps the best thing for us is to do normal things, take time to appreciate our good fortune, thank God for it, then realise that we have an absolute obligation to share what we have with those who have nothing. That sort of behaviour is one of the best ways of worshipping God, and it is an idea that we should take with us into Lent, which starts this Wednesday. *Fr Jim Dunne.*