

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Leviticus 13:1-2. 44-46 / Mark 1:40-45)  
14.02.2021

Leper

Dear brothers and sisters,

Who is the leper of whom our two readings speak? Let me suggest that each one of us is this leper. Perhaps, you might object saying: But I don't suffer from a skin disease, so I am not a leper. Let us come back to the last words of the first reading: "As long as the disease lasts, the leper must live apart; he must live outside the camp". The Word of God teaches us that a leper is not just someone who has a skin-disease. A leper is the one who lives apart as a consequence of his sickness. From this perspective we are all lepers because we have all a tendency to live apart.

How many of us live far from God who created us out of love and promised to be with us always. If we forget the presence of our creator by our side, as a result of this we very quickly forget that we are His creature. We are not situated in truth with all the inevitable consequences. We are not living as we should be and so not living our life to the full.

Many people live apart from the family or the community to which they belong. We see husbands and wives, parents and children, members of one community who no longer speak with each other. Some seek a sort of compensation for this outside their family or community circle. They find refuge on the screens of their laptops or mobile phones, in their imagination or virtual world; they escape reality, they dream. Addiction of one kind or another becomes their comfort, it provides an ephemeral nest.

We are members of a people. And yet how many live an isolated life, set apart from the people to whom they belong, without historical or religious roots, and without relationships... They become depressed, deeply depressed... even suicidal.

How many nations choose the path of an excessive nationalism, cutting themselves off from the interconnectedness in which all nations are called to share?

These are just a few examples of the leprosy from which we all suffer more or less.

An up-to-date visage of the leprosy we are speaking of is the confinement that has been imposed upon us and which we have freely chosen to live in order to reduce the spread of the virus: isolation, social distancing and the wearing of masks give us the opportunity to experience how painful it is to live apart, isolated, without the basic relationships which are constitutive of human life. We know how painful it is for grandparents not to be able to see their grandchildren for a while and vice versa.

So, perhaps this period in history is a favourable time to ask ourselves: What is our leprosy? What is the kind of isolation of which we are prisoners and of which we need to be healed?

The leper said to Jesus: "If you want to, you can cure me". At first sight, the request formulated by the leper seems banal, but in fact it contains an implicit Christology. The formulation of this

request says a lot about the identity of Jesus and the way the leper sees Him. Let me explain. The fact that the leper falls on his knees at Jesus' feet is the sign that he attributes divine status to Jesus. We know also that, in the Bible and in the rabbinic literature, a cure of leprosy was considered as marvellous as the power of raising someone from the dead. In the Second Book of Kings (5:7), we see Naaman who comes to ask the King of Israel to heal him from his skin disease. The king reacts: "Am I a God to give death and life as it is asked of me to cure someone from a skin disease". So, when the leper asks Jesus to heal him, this is a sign that the leper recognizes Jesus' identity; he recognizes that Jesus embodies the power and the will of God. As a matter of fact we see that the actual healing occurs at the word and command of Jesus. When the leper asks Jesus to heal him, he recognizes that Jesus is God; he recognizes that Jesus is all-powerful, and consequently that He can cure him. This is a great act of faith.

When we recognize that we are a leper, when we identify our tendency to isolate ourselves from our natural milieu, but then turn to Jesus in prayer for healing, we actually pose a great act of faith. When we turn to Jesus, I wonder if we ask for healing with deep faith, faith that comes from the bottom of our heart, or if we only ask him for healing at the tip of our tongue? What we need to ask ourselves is this: Is our faith in Jesus burning or lukewarm? Do we really desire to be healed? Do we truly want to be healed? Do we firmly believe that Jesus can heal us and that only Jesus can do so? Sometimes we say or think that Jesus does not listen to our prayer or does not answer our prayer. The real question is whether we really believe in the one to whom we pray? Do we really believe in the one of whom we implore healing?

Another question we could ask ourselves today is this: Who is the Jesus to whom we pray? Do we really believe that He is a merciful and all powerful God?

The Jesus in whom we believe is divine, but he is also human, fully human. The gospel narrative we have heard tells us that Jesus was deeply moved with compassion at the request of the leper. He was deeply moved in his guts. Jesus is a figure of compassion, who for the sake of a suffering human being is ready to violate the ritual laws in place by touching the leper, something which was forbidden because leprosy was a contagious disease. The compassionate Jesus suffers with those who suffer. Jesus cannot be insensitive to those who suffer and ask for healing. Compassion is of the essence of Jesus' nature.

Our final question we could ask ourselves this morning is this: Am I compassionate? Am I like the Good Samaritan deeply moved by a Jewish man lying half dead by the roadside, or am I, like the priest or the Levite of the parable, a person living apart, closed into my own little world, that is to say suffering from leprosy? It is never too late to repent and change.

Lord, give us compassionate hearts like your own heart.