

Sunday before Lent (6th in Ordinary) Year B

Leviticus 13:1-2,44-46, 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, Mark 1:40-45.

An open book before God

Our readings open up the issue of uncleanness and how by God's grace this may be healed. In particular the gospel shows the healing power of Jesus to rid us of what is unclean in our lives. The first reading especially may seem quaint and totally of its time as it tells what should be done if someone has leprosy, and how being unclean separates us from others.

In my youth there was an very eccentric vicar of St.Pancras he appeared on radio and I believe even TV playing the saw which he brought out to entertain like an organ voluntary out of place. However the main thing I remember was his occasional impatience with the scriptures. Whilst reading something like our Old testament lesson he would bang the bible shut before completing the reading, and say "what a lot of nonsense" and call for a hymn - perhaps accompanied with his saw. Most of us are not so showy in our dismissal of Scripture we don't understand or think has little to teach us today. Yet internally we can do the same. I would suggest it's always worthwhile both seeking historical context and asking God to speak through it to our situations and conditions. Leprosy as they understood it was not what we know and it was not contagious – but they thought it was. We might think ourselves much wiser but how much nonsense and flailing around in the unknown went on in the pandemic? Not least closing our churches.

Loneliness, unhappiness with self image both physical and mental can be for many the leprosy of our day not least the young leaving a feeling of uncleanness, isolation and depression which is very real even if the cause is imagined. Social media flourishes on aspiration and image and can leave many damaged as we saw in the encounters of grieving parents last week in the US congress with the ever richer masters of the internet and their hollow compassion for the casualties.

Our Gospel recalls Jesus healing a leper a condition that rendered individuals ritually unclean. Purity and impurity were not just physical but also spiritual and moral. This should resonate with issues today such as isolation and the role of community. The afflicted were required to live apart, signifying not just a physical separation but a profound social and communal isolation. We should be prompted to reflect on the importance of community and the effects of isolation, as well as our responsibility towards those who are marginalised or

ostracised. Unlike the mega tech billionaires who owe us everything they have, Jesus who owes us nothing but gives us everything – there is real compassion towards the leper contrary to the social norms of his time. Through divine compassion and healing he bestows his riches on us. What do we do with it? Should we not be challenged to consider how we extend compassion and healing to those in need, breaking beyond societal barriers in our own day?

As we approach Ash Wednesday and Lent we might first look inwards without being obsessed with self. We don't associate sin and illness like folk in the time of the Old Testament but the consequences of illness mirrored that of sin – separation from the true self, from God and from the community. Sin is by definition about separation from God, each other and the person we are called to be. Such separation has contemporary grit. We have all spilled stuff on a favourite garment or carpet and have gone through many actions to get it out and make it new again. Rarely is the restitution perfect however hard we try. A bit like our mistakes in life there's often a little reminder even if only we can see it.

As St. John reminds us we all sin and it can leave us feeling imperfect and unclean. The Leper says to Jesus “If you wish, you can make me clean.” Jesus is moved with pity and with his touch he says “I do will it. Be made clean.” It is a very personal encounter which the Leper broadcasts and it compromises Jesus's ministry and plans.

Though we are not unclean like the leper we probably have some unclean habits in our lives. These include stuff we say and do and how we use or abuse the innate blessings of our life – including resources and people. Your examples are for you but just as he made the leper clean, Jesus will help us with the things which are unclean in our lives – and we can draw from this odd encounter thousands of years ago to help us.

The leper has humility to ask Jesus to make him clean. Jesus doesn't force things on us. We can live in sinfulness if we want to – that goes back to Adam and Eve. So we can start by asking Jesus for help. On Tuesday we have Shrove Tuesday from the word shrive – to confess. **Fat Tuesday** is more than clearing out the cupboard – its clearing the soul. We have a special sacrament whereby we can ask Jesus to renew us. The sacrament of Reconciliation – confession, is rarely used but flows from our baptism and is recalled at the beginning of every communion. The reasons folk are hesitant are many and as personal as the needs for it. However there is nothing that will shock or surprise. Whilst we are unique what ails us and separates us is not. The priest acting "in persona Christi" - like another Christ will never be shocked or think less of you and he will ask for your prayers too as he too is a sinner and needs them.

Jesus looks at the leper with pity not judgement, He feels compassion, he was human like us and knows how hard it is to avoid temptation. He says “I do will it. Be made clean.” This is what Jesus wants for us. Likewise the priest in confession acting as Christ wants nothing less and sees penitents only with the loving eyes of God.

Jesus tells the leper to go to the priest and follow the law. We might think that we can sought everything ourselves without the help of the church, but even Jesus knew the importance of the faith he belonged to. The leper then goes out and tells everyone about what Jesus did for him. This is against Jesus's desire – and its worth noting here that the confidentiality of works both ways – it applies to the one speaking as much as to the one hearing. However, the excitement of hearing the healing forgiving words of Jesus is a wonderful thing and should change our day and lighten our lives. The effect of that should be shared but the detail is another matter. I suspect many of us have had to suffer the well meaning offer of another's detailed experience as the menu or diet for what ails us.

We have shared the word of the Lord and we will now share the bread life – we do it together with our personal and different needs, stains and separations. Let us not slam shut the Word or our hearts to the living bread who has pity on us and wills us have life in all its abundance. We are after all are an open book before God.

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February 11th 2024