

Homily of Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, 2024

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46; Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 11; 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1; Mark 1:40-45

The first reading is from the Book of Leviticus. The book is mainly about the Levites' priestly ministry. At that time, priests were from the tribe of Levi. The book deals with functions and concerns of priests and rituals, and spiritual rules and regulations for priests and the people.

In the first reading are some regulations and responsibility of priests concerning the disease of leprosy. It was the responsibility of priests to declare a person leprosy and unclean. Anyone declared leprosy by the priest "shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp" (Leviticus 12:46).

The leprosy "shall keep his garment rent and head bare, and muffle his beard;" and shout "unclean, unclean" should he come by people (Leviticus 13:44-46). By so doing, the leprosy alerted the people to give way so as not to be made 'unclean.' Leviticus 5:3 instructs, "If someone ... touches some human uncleanness, whatever kind of uncleanness this may be, subsequently becomes unclean."

There were two reasons why the Jews kept lepers apart from the community. First, the disease was quite contagious. Second, the Jews believed that those who suffered the disease were sinners (physically and spiritually unclean) and were being punished by God.

Leprosy was a dangerous disease. It mercilessly chops off part of the body; toes, fingers, ear blades, lips, eyelashes, and so on. It hardens the parts of the body it affects in such a way that it renders medication ineffective. Not only among the Jews, but also around the world, the disease was dreaded, and sufferers were isolated. A Catholic priest, St. Damien de Veuster, who became known as St. Damien the Leper lived and worked in a leper colony in Hawaii (USA). He contracted the disease and died in 1889. Despite the advanced medical treatment of the disease, leper colonies still exist today in various parts of the world.

How did the leper in today's gospel hear about Jesus and his healing power since he was supposed to live in a leper's colony? Did the other lepers in the colony not hear about Jesus? Maybe they did but they chose to remain in their condition. How did he find out where Jesus was? He did something extraordinary and dramatic. He broke all Jewish restricting rules and regulations. He broke away from the colony and from hopelessness and made his way to Jesus, probably shouting "unclean," "unclean" as he went. The crowd might have dispersed and stood far away as he approached. He got to where Jesus was, perhaps alone with Jesus, knelt down and begged him to make him clean. Moved with pity, Jesus touched him and healed him.

There are people who must break away from 'the leprosy' which has colonized them and kept them in bondage and in captivity. Most times, independence or freedom of the colonized is achieved by refusing to remain colonized. The leper's story reminds us of the prodigal son who came to his senses and left the pigs farm and returned to his father (Luke 15:11-32). We need to come to our senses and ask ourselves some sincere questions. "What is my leprosy?" "What has colonized me and taken away my freedom?" We need to identify our leprosy and come to Jesus for liberation and freedom.

In one way or another, we are all spiritually leprous. As leprosy deforms and disfigures its victims, our sins deform and disfigure us. As leprosy hardens the skin and renders medication ineffective, our hearts are hardened by our sins, addictions, attitudes, and lifestyle, making the word of God unable to penetrate us. But Jesus treats us with pity when we come to him. He forgives us and heals us. The leper, isolated in a colony, heard about Jesus and his healing power and came looking for Jesus. This leper is a challenge to us.

It was the priest that declared a leprous unclean (Leviticus 13:8); and it was the priest that declared a person clean when the person was healed from leprosy (Leviticus 13:17). In today's gospel, Jesus says to the leper, "... go, show yourself to the priest ..." (Mark 1:44). These passages are not mere coincidence. The passages are some of the biblical foundations of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We show ourselves to the priest at the Sacrament of Reconciliation in humble obedience to Jesus. And the priest, in the name and authority of Jesus and the Church, declares us 'clean.'

Lastly, are there people we treat as if they are lepers? Are there people we despise, ostracize, exclude, and discriminate against? Are there people we label 'unclean' and avoid them? We cannot be desiring to be close to God while we, resentfully, distance ourselves from our fellow human beings. St. Paul advises us in the second reading, "...whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Avoid giving offense, whether Jew or Greek or the Church of God" (1 Corinthians 10:32). Let us ask God the grace of giving love to one another instead of giving offense and the grace to do all things for his glory. Amen.

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP