

## **Sixth Sunday of the year February 11, 2018**

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

We have been witnessing an unprecedented desire from so many people to do something in order to alleviate the pain, the sorrow and the hurt in the lives of people. A little gesture can give us a great insight into a person's character displaying the person's humanity. All of us are social beings and have been created for community and are called to live our faith in and with a community. Our Christian commitment demands us to look into the needs of others. God has given us the blessing to belong to others in the community of the church and in the community of the world. We must appreciate these blessings God has given us and be at the service of others. In the Gospel we have the healing of the leper by Jesus. The leper comes to Jesus with a request to be healed and Jesus has pity on the person and touches him and tells him that he wants him to be healed. The person once healed goes on proclaiming to all the miraculous deed of Jesus. In the first reading we have Moses and Aaron speak to the people of the greatness of God and since they are holy the people have to avoid all that is unclean. Certain rituals had to be observed in case of serious illness. In the second reading Paul tells us that every human activity can give glory to God. Taking Paul as our model, we are called upon to imitate Christ who always sought to help others. Everyone in the community is to reflect Christ in their words and behavior.

In today's First Reading from the Book of Leviticus we heard of society's treatment towards those who suffered temporary skin disorders. The passage belongs to legislation regarding purity. The explicit concern in this reading is any skin disorder in the community of Israel. Such physical disorders were relatively easy to identify. Considering them as unclean because of their afflictions, they were isolated from the community. Besides, they were also expected to behave in a certain way during their isolation. Although primitive hygiene considered such diseases as highly contagious, therefore requiring isolation from the community, it was the religious and social ostracism that dictated that those who were stricken by these skin disorders lacked the necessary bodily integrity to worship Yahweh. To ensure that those who worshipped Yahweh were clean, when someone was suspected of having a skin disorder, he was sent before the priest who would examine the person to determine the status of his condition according to the Law of Moses. The chief concern in this legislation is to protect the community from any disease suffered by an individual. Once it was determined that a person was unclean, that person was expected to move outside the

community, wear torn clothes, leave their hair disarranged, cover their lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He had to live in isolation and this would last as long as the person was afflicted with the skin disease. Leprosy made a person an outcast both socially and religiously.

Today's Second Reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians is summarized by saying that charity is the first spiritual Law by which Christians must live. Charity must govern the behavior of each and every Christian. The Christian behavior ordains that those who shine in the light of Christ be servants of others, not offending anyone by their actions. They must not seek their own advantage, but that of the others. The Christian who embraces a spirit mind, he is always concerned with the well-being of his brothers and sisters in Christ and the building up of the Holy Catholic Church. Paul tells the Corinthians that every human activity can give glory to God. He mentions in particular the everyday activity of eating and drinking. When we avoid offending others by what we do, we please God. However, Paul is always concerned about people helping others and in this way he imitates Christ to give example to them. The Christian, who has a spiritual heart, must be always ready to sacrifice himself in the interest of the others and the Church. This is because a true Christian does everything for the glory of God so that he may dwell in the Divine Presence of Jesus. The true Christian is ready to sacrifice his ways in service to the others so that they may be saved. Contrary to this, one can decide to have his own way and behave in an unacceptable way that scandalizes others.

Today's Gospel narrates the miracle of Jesus healing of a leper. Leprosy was a dreaded disease during the time of Jesus as it was in the Old Testament. In Palestine leprosy was looked upon as an incurable disease. Lepers were not meant to live in the city with the people and could not have any contact with them. They had to live on their own, away from people where their families would leave some food for them. They were considered to be truly cursed by God. If they had a reason to go to the town they would have had to carry a bell with them. They would constantly ring this bell as they walked and cried out "Unclean, Unclean", informing people to keep away from them because they were struck with a very contagious disease. Generally the term Leprosy was used to describe a wide variety of skin diseases and as such the person was considered to be ritually unclean according to the Law of Moses. They were excluded and isolated from the ordinary interactions of society. Here we are not given any information as to why this leper alone thought Jesus could heal him. Certainly

there were other Lepers in Palestine during that time. Perhaps he had heard about the healing capacity of Jesus. He simply comes to Jesus and makes a request with the words: "If you want to, you can heal me." This was a bold move on the part of the leper, given the seriousness of the disease and the problem of uncleanness. He comes with confidence to Jesus and places his trust in him with the sure hope that this prophet is capable of healing him and he could rejoin the society.

Here we have one of the most revealing pictures of Jesus, his kindness, compassion and humane attitude. He did not drive away the man who had broken the law and now was kneeling before him. By law the leper had no right to speak to him at all, but Jesus met the desperation of the human need with an understanding compassion. He encouraged him to come closer to him to make his human request. The leper showed his absolute faith in the power of Jesus to heal him even from the incurable disease. Jesus did something very human too which no ordinary person would do. Moved with pity for the poor sufferer, he stretched out his hand and touched him, a person who was considered unclean by law. For the Lord he was not someone unclean but a child of God in desperate need. Jesus told him that he wished and wanted him to be healed and cured him instantly of his leprosy. Having cleansed the leper Jesus sent him to fulfill the ritual prescribed by law, to meet the priests and be restored to society. He did not defy the convention and regulation of the time but submitted to it. Here we see the compassion, power and wisdom of Jesus manifested in the simple miracle of healing. Jesus considered every person as precious and valuable.

Today's Gospel echoes **three messages** related to dwelling in the Presence of the Lord. First of all, the miraculous healing speaks of the divine power and mercy of the Lord that includes everyone, even the lepers who were excluded from society under the Mosaic Law. Jesus came to save the lost sheep, not those who were already saved. He opens his arms to all, drawing them all to himself with his infinite healing love. Secondly, Jesus tells the cured leper not to say anything to anyone. It is in fact in the context of Mark, a messianic secret. It was also necessary for the public ministry of Jesus for many would see him as only a miracle worker and forget his work as the divine Messiah. People would look for the temporary manifestation of power in the miracles and forget the manifestation of the power of God. Jesus did not want such things to happen. Every miracle is the external manifestation of the inner spiritual activity. The third message that is that once one is cleansed by Christ through his messianic healing

the person is expected to freely proclaim the Gospel and spread the Good News to all. This is exactly what the cured leper did. He was excited with his healing and he could rejoin the community. He had found the truth, the way and the life in Jesus. He went ahead and shared it with others proclaiming the messianic message. At the same time, it should be noted that the actions of the leper, contrary to Jesus' command to say nothing to anyone, made it difficult for Jesus to openly speak in the towns because the people would have tried to make Him their leader, their King. As such, Jesus had to distance Himself in the country in order to continue His work.

The passage tells us that Jesus was moved with pity when he saw the leper kneeling before him and heals him. We see both the divine power and the divine compassion of Jesus in this act of healing. The divine power is necessary in all instantaneous cures. Even in the case of curable diseases nature takes its own time to bring about a healing. In this incurable illness the healing is immediate with the supernatural power placed in the healer. His compassion for the suffering person is also divine. It is out of compassion for the whole of humanity that Jesus became incarnate and came to earth. It is out of compassion for humanity that he died on the cross. Compassion means to suffer with and Jesus suffers with the person who is unwell and heals him. This attitude of his makes him touch the person and accept him as he is. This is shown in his life whenever he preaches and works any miracle. Seeing the crowd that was hungry he had compassion on them and he fed them with human and divine food. He had compassion on the widow of Naim and raised her son back to life. He had compassion on the woman caught in adultery and protected her. He had compassion on his disciples caught in the storm and went to them walking on water to bring them to safety. Here he has compassion on the leper and heals to restore him into the society.

Once the healing was done, Jesus admonishes the leper to tell no one about the incident and what had taken place. He asked him only to fulfill the ritual norms of restoration into the society. But the leper was not able to contain himself regarding the changes that had taken place in him. For him it was the new life and he felt compelled to announce the same to all. Immediately he began to spread the news everywhere. Ironically the leper did what Jesus would do by going out and preaching the word. What Jesus did not want to happen took place now through the man. The popularity of Jesus greatly increased everywhere he attempted to go. This does not mean that people really understood who Jesus

was. There is no indication that this publicity increased the faith and understanding of people about him. He was known as a miracle worker and perhaps a liberator who was not afraid to touch even the lepers. At the same time there is an interesting paradox. In the beginning Jesus could move freely and the leper was cut off. As the story ended the situation was reversed. The leper went off cured into the company of people, while it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. Jesus had taken in reality the leper's pace. In order to avoid superficial praise he had to stay away from people, outside the towns. Even then crowds came to him and misunderstood of his identity which will ultimately be revealed at the foot of the cross.

Today's miracle is a perfect example of our Christian prayer, the prayer of petition. In its most usual form, it is a most spontaneous prayer where we express the awareness of our relationship with God and place our needs before him. It is a prayer of humility, submission and the expression of dependence on him the Almighty God. It is a prayer where we ask God for a favor and trust God will give it to us. It is a prayer where we place our complete trust in him and accept his grace and his divine response. Here the leper makes the prayer: If you want you can heal me and Jesus responds. Our Christian prayer Our Father is a prayer of Petition where we ask God for bread, forgiveness and protection. The prayer of Jesus at Gethsemane was the beautiful account of the prayer of petition and the instance where God responded differently. The miracle of the healing of the leper shows how efficacious is the prayer of Petition and God answers this prayer when we pray to him with sincerity and open heart.

There is an important lesson to be learned from the healing miracle. In our spiritual work for the glory of God, we must be of one mind that we must work together, not against each other. There is no need to compete for glory in the work of the Lord for all glory goes to the Lord himself. If one seeks glory in his Christian work, then he is not of the Spirit of Christ. Jesus healed the leprous man and restored him to community and sought no publicity. We have been created for community and are called to live our faith in and with a community. In the process of healing Jesus touched the leper and in doing so he rendered himself ritually unclean, opened himself to the risk of contagion but expressed solidarity with the sick man. It reminds one of Francis of Assisi overcoming his own fear and loathing by embracing a leper he met on the road. The healed person is now the messenger of God and he goes on telling people of the good news. For him it was new experience and new life and he cannot stop speaking about it. The word of

God calls us today to be committed wholeheartedly to sacrificing ourselves so that we will not offend our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must enjoy a spirit of togetherness in the hope of drawing everyone to the presence of Jesus. Our God is there right in our midst and he wants us in his mission. He will use us to touch and change others in ways that we do not expect or hope for.

Martin was a young soldier in the Roman army. Elegantly dressed, he was mounted on his horse one day when he was accosted by a leper begging for alms. The sight and the stench of rotting flesh were so repulsive to the sensitivities of young Martin that his first instincts were to ride off on his horse. But something inside him made him walk up to the beggar. Since all he had was his military coat, he cut it in two and gave half to the leper while he wrapped himself with the other half. It was a very cold winter day. Many in the crowd thought this was so ridiculous a sight that they laughed and jeered but some realized that they were seeing Christian goodness. He was eighteen years old. That night in his dream he saw Christ clothed in a half coat saying to the angels around his throne, "Martin has clothed me with his garment." This event was the turning point in the life of him who was to become St Martin of Tours.

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