

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Sixth Ordinary Sunday

First reading:

(Leviticus 13.1-2, 45-46)

Leprosy

This reading from the law sets the scene for Jesus' healing in the gospel reading.

Leprosy in its modern medical sense (*Mycobacterium leprae*) is a devastating disease, leading to the loss of fingers, and then even whole hands and feet.

These biblical regulations were, with good reason, designed to prevent contagion. In biblical times lack of precise diagnosis led to other skin diseases, such as psoriasis and even acne, being lumped together with it.

So, the worst thing about many of the lesser forms of 'leprosy' would have been the isolation, for 'lepers' were cut off from all human society. The priests were involved not so much as sacred ministers but as reliable persons to judge the symptoms, although, of course, the sacrifice of thanks for disappearance of the disease was a genuine religious thanksgiving.

Question:

Which is worse: the isolation or the disease?

Second reading:

(1 Corinthians 10.31-11.1)

Liberty and Love

This is the last reading this year from First Corinthians, the end of a section of the letter, so summing up. Paul has just quoted a slogan that that difficult community threw in his face: 'Everything is permissible.' This was the conclusion they drew from the abolition of the restrictions of the Jewish Law. Paul's principle was that the Spirit was an inner guide, so that no external restrictions were necessary. With their slogan, the Corinthians jumped to the conclusion that there were no limits, so Paul now adds various pieces of guidance: 'Do everything you do for the glory of God!' If the glory of God is always before our minds, we can hardly go wrong. 'Never be the cause of offence', that is, never lead anyone else into sin.

It is easy sometimes to put people in a situation in which they are bound to fail, through fear or anger or frustration, or just because they are unequal to the task. 'Take me as your pattern, as I take Christ for mine.' To us, this may sound arrogant, but Paul regarded himself as the Servant of the Lord Jesus, just as Jesus regarded himself as the Servant of the Lord. So Paul is encouraging the self-confident Corinthians to put themselves in a position of servants, serving the community for the glory of God. No matter what our position, we can always do something more for the community.

Question:

Are 'ministries' in the Church really acts of service or of self-importance?

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Gospel:

(Mark 1.40-45)

Jesus Heals a Leper

Mark shows the warmth of Jesus' humanity and his concern for the leper. The leper had no right even to approach Jesus, but he must have felt that he would get a favourable response, no word of reproach.

'Jesus felt sorry for him' is a weak expression; the Greek is far stronger: colloquially, it can literally be translated 'was gutted'; Jesus felt it to the depths of his being. Then Jesus touched him, both touching someone ritually impure and risking the infection. There have been famous repetitions of this brave and heartfelt gesture: Francis of Assisi kissing a leper's hand, Princess Diana shaking hands with an AIDS sufferer (when the sickness was thought to be contagious by touch). One can imagine the awestruck horror of the bystanders at this outrageous expression of love and sympathy.

Why, then, does Jesus 'sternly send him away'? A more faithful rendering would be not 'sternly' but 'in anger'. It is possible that the anger is directed at the leprosy, considered as an exterior invasion, so 'sent it away'. At least Jesus' whole-hearted emotional involvement with the sufferer is palpable.

Question:

Why was Jesus so moved, or even angry, about the leprosy?
