

### **Sixth Sunday in Ordinary time**

Some of us have inherited skin that is far from being perfect. My siblings and I blame my father for the many moles and other things that grow on our skin. It is not unusual for us to be checked over by a dermatologist. It is always good to hear him say, "I can find nothing for you to worry about. It is just that you and your skin is aging." Those words were very seldom heard in the time of Jesus. People were afraid of anybody who suffered from a skin disease.

What was called leprosy in the time of Jesus was probably very seldom what is now called Hansen's disease. Any kind of skin disease was called leprosy by the Hebrew people of the Old Testament and the Jews in the time of Jesus. As we saw in our reading today from the Book of Leviticus people who suffered from a skin disease were declared unclean and had to leave their homes and families and live outside of the towns. They had to wear torn clothes and had to warn others of their condition by calling out that they were unclean. That word "unclean" meant that they were unholy and cursed by God. They were not able to take part in any acts of public worship. Leprosy was a living death.

The man who approaches Jesus today must have held onto his faith despite the way that he was treated. He makes a profound act of faith in Jesus as one who had

the power to cure him. Only God could raise someone from the dead and cure a leper. "If you want to you can heal me."

Perhaps we could ask ourselves if we pray with the kind of faith that the leper showed today? Do we ask for what we need or what our loved ones need no matter how difficult those things may seem? Or do we sometimes think that some things are too hard even for God?

Jesus responds to the leper with great love. Our translation, "He felt sorry for him," does not capture the depth of emotion that Jesus was feeling. "Moved with compassion from the depths of his heart", may be a better way to translate the Greek word that Mark uses here. "Of course, I want to. Be healed." As he says this he reaches out and touches the man. Jesus makes himself "unclean" to bring wholeness to the leper. He identifies himself with us in our weakness to bring us strength. Not only is Jesus being acclaimed as God here, but the depth of his humanity is also being revealed.

We cannot underestimate the depth of the love that Jesus has for each one of us. Whenever something goes wrong in our lives, whenever we are hurt by other people, whenever we suffer sickness of one kind or another, Jesus is moved with compassion for us. He wants us to be happy. He wants us to live in peace with one another.

Jesus wants us to be well. It would be good for us to think of how often Jesus reaches out to us and touches us to show his compassion for us. It would be good to remember how often Jesus uses those around us to bring us comfort and healing. Whenever parents embrace their children in their pain or their joy Jesus is there. Jesus greets us in the touch of those who extend their hands to us in welcome. Jesus heals us in the skilled hands of the surgeon or doctor or nurse who cares for us in our sickness.

We often find it hard to accept that the Jesus in us reaches out in love to the Jesus in the other person. Today/tomorrow we celebrate the World Day of Prayer for the Sick. In his message for this day Pope Francis wrote a very beautiful message. Towards the end he said, “Jesus bestowed upon the Church his healing power. The Church’s mission is a response to Jesus’ gift, for she knows that she must bring to the sick the Lord’s own gaze, full of tenderness and compassion. Health care ministry will always be a necessary and fundamental task, to be carried out with renewed enthusiasm by all, from parish communities to the largest healthcare institutions. We cannot forget the tender love and perseverance of many families in caring for their chronically sick or severely disabled children, parents and relatives. The care given within families is an extraordinary witness of love for the human person; it

needs to be fittingly acknowledged and supported by suitable policies. Doctors and nurses, priests, consecrated men and women, volunteers, families and all those who care for the sick, take part in this ecclesial mission. It is a shared responsibility that enriches the value of the daily service given by each.”

Often our hearts reach out to people that we cannot physically touch. The daily television news reveals the suffering of people caught up in wars or unrest. We are moved with compassion for those who have lost their homes and livelihood and seek refuge wherever they can find it. During the season of Lent we are given an opportunity to reach out to some of these people through Project Compassion. We cannot be with them, but the different arms of Caritas throughout the world can embrace them and meet some of their needs. Today we are invited to take home one of the Project Compassion share packs or a Project Compassion box for the kitchen table. The stories of some of those in need are told there. We are invited to respond to them each week in whatever way we feel moved to do so.

Because Jesus reached out in love to that leper, he suffered something of his same condition, not being able to go openly into any town. May the Lord deepen our compassion for others, no matter what that may cost.