

## **Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Most of us are a lot more conscious now of how infectious diseases can be than we were twelve months ago. We have been through lock downs and know of those who have spent time in isolation to try to prevent the spread of Covid 19.

I think that we can understand a little better the laws that were prescribed in today's first reading from the Book of Leviticus because of our experience of 2020. Leprosy in its full-blown form was a horrible disease and very infectious. Those who suffered from Leprosy could lose fingers or toes or even more. But those who suffered other skin diseases were often called lepers and were equally cut off from the rest of the community. Those who suffered these skin diseases were asked to go to the priests to confirm their symptoms and then later attest their cure because these men were considered to be reliable witnesses. The offering the healed then made to God would have been one of thanksgiving.

Can you imagine what people thought and how they felt when Jesus takes a leper by the hand and cures him. Our Gospel tells us that Jesus felt sorry for him. But that is a poor translation of the deep compassion that welled up from deep within his being. He felt this man's physical pain, but also the pain of being cut off from his family and friends. Jesus responds to the faith of the sick man.

“If you want to you can cure me.” Jesus responds by touching him and saying, “Of course I want to. Be cured!”

That moment in the Gospel is one that we might dwell upon to help us to know what to do when we are in deep need. Jesus has no less compassion for us than he had for that leper. We too can come to Jesus and confidently say to him, “If you want to you can cure me.” But how would we feel praying like that? Would it test our faith in Jesus? Would it test our resolve to do all that we would need to do to allow Jesus to heal us?

If I asked the Lord to heal a toothache but refused to go to see a dentist then what kind of prayer is that? If I asked the Lord to help me to lose weight but chose not to change my diet or do any extra exercise, then I am making it pretty hard for God to hear my prayer. The changes that we often pray for in our prayers usually need to begin with us. We can hardly pray for a greener world if we do not care about how we dispose of our waste. We can hardly pray for a more compassionate world if we do not notice those close to us who need our compassion.

It is hard for us to admit of our need to be healed by Jesus. We are about to begin the Season of Lent. Lent is given to us to help us to prepare well for Easter. But it

also a time of Grace to help us to look more closely at ourselves and to notice what might need to change. The invitation is to look at ourselves with the eyes of Jesus. We come back to that deep compassion that Jesus had for the leper; a compassion that he has for each one of us. Jesus can only look at us with eyes of love. Jesus knows the struggles that many of us have to overcome habits of sin and selfishness. Jesus wants us to be free of those things that bind us and weigh us down.

In our gospel we may have been surprised that Jesus sternly sent the cured leper away. A more faithful rendering of the Greek would be not ‘sternly’ but ‘in anger’. So what Jesus said even sounds worse. But that anger was not directed at the man but at the leprosy. The sickness was seen as an external invasion and so Jesus sent it away in anger. In the Season of Lent we can identify those things that need to be sent away from us. We can identify those things that like leprosy cut us off from the people around us that need our love. We can ask the Lord to send them away.

On this day when we are thinking of the Lord’s compassion, we are also celebrating Project Compassion Sunday. This year, Project Compassion is built around the theme to ‘Be More’. It is taken from the prayer of St. Bishop Oscar Romero to “Aspire not to have more, but to be more” and challenges us to venture into a new

experience of compassion. Supporting Project Compassion is a way we can proclaim the faith that is in our hearts and help our brothers and sisters in need.