

Homily for 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B (14th February 2021)

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Lev 13:1-2, 44-46; Ps 31(32); 1 Cor 10:31-11:1; Mk 1:40-45

Theme: The Pain of Isolation and the Touch of Jesus

Chapters thirteen and fourteen of the book of Leviticus deal with various kinds of skin diseases (which the author call leprosy), and the rites of purification to welcome back those who suffer from such conditions. Leprosy, also known today as Hansen's disease is an infection caused by slow-growing bacteria, *Mycobacterium leprae*. These bacteria affect the nerves, skin, nose lining or the eyes.

In the first reading, the author deals with the role of the priest in handling leprosy. Should a person have a swelling on his skin, an eruption or spot, suspected to be a case of leprosy, the priest was to examine the person immediately. The person is quarantined for seven days and then re-examined. At the end of seven days, if there is a spread of the skin disease, the priest pronounces the person unclean, and he/she is excluded from the community. If on the other hand, the priest judges that it is not a case of leprosy, the person goes through the cleansing rites and then readmitted into the community (cf. Lev 13:1-14). But if the priest examines the person and there is raw flesh, he shall pronounce him unclean; it is leprous (Lev 13:15). Although leprosy generically describes various skin diseases, there were actual leprosy cases, which were judged contagious and warranted exclusion from the community. Today we can think of those who feel excluded during this pandemic, particularly those who are shielding. Isolation from people is a painful experience. It is worse when people stigmatized an isolated person.

Every person would want to be in a community where they are loved. The leper who came to Jesus pleaded on his knees for healing. He wanted to be back to the community. Jesus understood and felt sorry for him, stretched out his hand and touched him. Jesus was not afraid to touch the leper. Touching a leper renders one unclean. But the touch of Jesus cleansed the man. One can only imagine how happy the leper would have been. But Jesus reminds him to adhere to the Law. He must go and show himself to the priest, who will declare him clean. After that, he must make the required sacrifice prescribed in the Law as evidence for his recovery. Although Jesus is the ideal High Priest, he respects the instituted authority. How would Jesus expect that one who has been suffering both from leprosy and exclusion from the community, will go away quiet? The man went about spreading the news of his healing. We can think about the many testimonies of people who have recovered from coronavirus or other diseases like cancer. The least they can do is to share their story and invite people to celebrate with them.

Many of us may not be physically sick. Spiritual leprosy is a reality. Sin cripples us and isolates us spiritually from both God and the community of believers. Like the leper who approached Jesus, we too should acknowledge our guilt and approach God for forgiveness. When God forgives our sins, especially in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, it is always as if a heavy load has been lifted. The Psalmist feels that joy of forgiveness. 'Happy the man whose offence is forgiven... I have acknowledged my sins... And you, Lord, have forgiven the guilt of my sin.' The Psalmist, therefore, bursts out in joy and rejoice in the Lord.

The challenge for us today is to live like Jesus. We must not cause further pain to those who are already suffering by stigmatizing, and psychologically excluding them. St. Paul tells us in the second reading, 'Never do anything offensive to anyone'. We are to accommodate everyone, 'not anxious for my own advantage for the advantage of everybody else'. The way we treat people, welcome and accommodate them in their pain can contribute to their healing. While the Law of Moses excluded people and sent them away from the camp, because it could not cure them, Jesus welcome and reinstated people into the community.