

6TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B
THE FAITH OF A LEPER AND THE LOVE OF CHRIST

"If You want to, You can cure me ... I want to. Be cured!" (Mk. 1: 40-41)

Every sickness brings pains and some mental anguish to the sick. There is also a certain form of separation that sickness imposes or the sick person imposes on himself to recover speedily and wholly. However, the case of leprosy was very different. Before the 1940s when a cure for leprosy was found, after the causative agent, *Mycobacterium Leprae*, was discovered by G. H. Armauer Hansen in 1873, leprosy posed the greatest threat to man's health because of its incurable nature and intractable spread. The case of leprosy is at the centre of our reflection today. How lepers were treated among the Jews at the time of Moses and how Jesus responds to them in the Gospel are diametrically different. The emphasis on leprosy in our liturgy today alludes to a deeper and broader understanding of the subject. Leprosy here is to be understood beyond mere physical ailment; it extends to the spiritual state of sinfulness, where sin is the leprosy of the soul. For a sinful soul is a soul that is alienated from God, its Creator.

The First Reading of today (Lev. 13: 1-2, 44-46) presents us with regulations the priests have to observe concerning various bodily ailments that could be a menace to the health of others in the community. Leprosy attracts specific mention because of its virulent nature. A leper, therefore, was to be ostracised from the people, alienated from the society, isolated from family and treated as an outcast by all. He was socially discriminated against, culturally rejected and ritually unclean. The law protected the healthy to save him from any possible infections. "A man infected with leprosy must wear his clothing torn and his hair disordered; he must shield his upper lip and cry: 'Unclean, unclean.' As long as the disease lasts he must be unclean, and therefore he must live apart; he must live outside the camp" (Lev. 13: 45-46). Such was the burden of a leper in Old Testament times up to the time of Jesus. He was a man laden with stigma and trauma. Similarly, a soul living in sin feels the same ways towards God, like a stranger in his Father's house. The approach of Jesus in the Gospel presents some comfort and welcoming.

The Leper with Courageous Faith: The leper in the Gospel displays an enormous amount of courage by "coming to Jesus." This act is against the law and the leper knows it. So why does he do that? Already we have been told that Jesus' "reputation rapidly spread everywhere, through all the surrounding Galilean countryside" (Mk. 1: 28). So the leper must have heard about Jesus and the "mighty works" He was doing. He must have heard about the synagogue incident when

Jesus released the man bound by a demon (Mk. 1: 23-26); about Peter's mother-in-law, and the many people Jesus healed on the same day (Mk. 1: 29-34). These testimonies roused up his faith in Jesus so much so that he has no option but to disobey the quarantine law that restricts him. If the leper must be healed, then he has to present himself to Jesus. Our faith can become moribund if we do not challenge. "Faith without good deeds is dead, St. James (2: 26) tells us.

"If You want to, You can cure me": The leper approaches Jesus against all odds. He kneels in reverence, submission and supplication. He and utters the lines of prayer very similar to the prayer Jesus Himself will offer to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane at the time of His torment: "If You want to, You can cure me" (Mk. 1: 40). Here is a prayer of total surrender to the will of God. The leper's prayer demonstrates his trust and confidence in the power of Jesus. Though he has complete faith in His ability to cure him, he still recognises the right of choice that Jesus has over his request. Some translations record this prayer thus: "If you want to, You can make me clean." There is a profound depth in this translation because asking to be made "clean" goes beyond the physical healing. It expresses the Jewish understanding that sickness is a result of sin. Therefore, asking to be made clean implies spiritual cleansing by the forgiveness of sins. In other words, the leper was asking to be made whole – to be healed and forgiven. Sometimes in our prayers, we forget these aspects of "Thy will be done"; and "Lord Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Lk. 18: 13). The leper here reminds us that we are sinners, and teaches us to surrender to the will of God in or prayer - tell it to God and be open to His will in your life.

"Of course I want to. Be cured!": The leper was compelled by faith to come closer to Jesus beyond the restricted distance of fifty metres; Jesus, on His part, was moved by compassion and love to touch the untouchable. "Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him" (Mk. 1: 41). These acts of faith, compassion, pity and love will come to characterise every miracle the Jesus works throughout the gospels. We are drawn to Him by faith and He comes to us out of compassion. It is the way of life of Jesus to stoop down to our weak human situations to feel what we feel to raise us to wholeness. How comforting that Jesus says to the leper: *"Of course I want to. Be cured!"* The healing was instantaneous. Everyone would love to have this experience every time we pray. But sometimes, if not, oftentimes, heaven remains silent. However, I dare tell us that God answers all our prayers in His ways. No prayer is wasted when they are offered in a good state and for the right reasons.

“Mind you say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your healing prescribed by Moses as evidence of your recovery”: It is not strange to us that Jesus does not want to publicise His identity. The “Messianic Secrecy” is a common feature in Mark though not peculiar to him. The time has not yet come and besides, Jesus does not want to be known by His heroic and great works but by way of His cross and suffering. The humility of Jesus comes through very vividly by asking the leper to go show himself to the priest and to offer the prescribed sacrifice. This was not necessary for He was greater than Moses or any other priest. Nevertheless, He preferred to regard Himself as an ordinary law-abiding Jew endowed with supernatural and divine powers. Therefore, the healing brought forth by His intervention has to be ratified by a priest, as was the custom.

My dear friends, we may not be sick of leprosy of the body, but are we sure we do not have leprosy of the soul? We sure do need to go to Jesus. Today, there are fears and restrictions regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the spiritual hospital, where we can be healed, forgiven and made whole. The Lord invites us to come to Him as the leper, who, aware of his pitiable condition, broke the social and legal barriers to meet the Lord. Let us come and encounter the Lord, for He waits for us to accept us as we are, stretch out His hand, touch and embrace us. This is the challenge that the leper has posed to us. May the grace of God be sufficient for us.