

Dcn. Tom Loewe's Homily for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2-10-2024

MARK 1:40-45 - The Cleansing of the Leper

"A leper came to Him [and kneeling down] begged Him and said, "If You wish, You can make me clean." Moved with pity, He stretched out His hand, touched him and said to him, 'I do will it, be made clean.' The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean."

It would do well for us to be aware that this episode in the life of Jesus is called the "cleansing of a leper", not the "healing of a leper." The leper asks to be made clean and Jesus responds by making him clean. In order to understand this distinction between being clean and being healed, we must look beneath the surface of the Gospel at how the Word of God — that is, Jesus Christ — is revealed. He is revealed by what He says and by what He does; by what He is asked to do, and how He responds.

The difference between being clean and unclean — as we heard in Old Testament reading today — involves a complicated set of conditions...conditions that are set for a specific purpose. That purpose has to do not primarily with health, but with ritual purity. In Hebrew thought, no one could enter the Temple who was not pure, and if you could not enter the Temple, you were denied access to the living God. You could not pray with your community, nor could you offer sacrifice for your sins. You were as good as dead; reckoned to be one with the pagans, the unbelievers, the ones who were not chosen by God to be His people.

Lepers, then, who were deemed by the law to be unclean, were worse than dead; they were the living dead. They were living souls who were trapped — by the condition of their skin — to be set apart. They were feared. They were excluded. They were the subjects of ridicule and revulsion. And, if they sinned, as all men do, they were denied relief. They had to live inside the rotting flesh of their bodies, and the rotting sin of their souls.

So! What to do if you're a Leper!?! ... That is where we begin.

A Leper sees Jesus coming his way and so he drops down on his knees in the middle of the road and begs for help. He says: "If You wish, You can make me clean." It is another way of saying, "If it's your will, O Lord, I can be saved." It is a powerful prayer of petition and submission — and it is also filled with hope. It is not unlike the Lord's Prayer where we say, "Thy will be done."

Maybe we should follow that man's example because, in fact, this Leper is very much like all of us. He is desperate for God's help. He has great needs, and only the Lord can help. Well, we all have great needs. We all have sinned, and we all have fallen short. We are all saddled with burdens: physical, social, familial and spiritual. Our souls are at risk daily.

So, with this in mind, look at what he does! He confronts the Lord. He kneels down in front of Jesus and asks for help. It is not like Jesus can avoid him, I mean, there he is — in the middle of the road on his knees. Jesus cannot go around him -- He must deal with this person in front of Him. The leper's persistence is a clue to how we should conduct our own prayer. We should not apologize because we are weak — God knows that. As it says in Psalm 103, "He knows how we are formed; He remembers that we are dust." And so, with eternity at stake, we should be bold in our prayer and express to Him our deepest thoughts, our deepest fears, and trust that He will hear us.

What happens next is perhaps the most exciting part of the story. It says, "Moved with pity, He stretched out his hand, [and] touched him." It is worth noting that the phrase "moved with pity" is translated differently in different versions of the Gospel. Not that the phrase is controversial, but rather, that the original Greek is not easily translated into English. In some bibles, we will read, "He was filled with compassion," while in others, it says, "He was filled with indignation."

And it is fitting that we see this phrase in all its possible meanings because Jesus sees this man kneeling in front of Him and He is stirred to the depths of His heart by what He sees. Pity? Yes, pity. What could be more pitiful than seeing a scabby-faced man in ragged clothes on his knees. Indignant? You bet! What could be more infuriating than seeing a person — a child of God; a true son of Israel — humbled in such a way by his own people simply because he was sick? Compassion? How could it be otherwise? Jesus is torn with compassion for this poor man who is in such need of help.

But there is more to it than that. Ask yourself. Just what exactly does Jesus see? A man hated, rejected, despised, spat upon, essentially naked, shamed, suffering, helpless, weak; dying. Is this the fate of all men? Does Jesus see His own humanity in this poor leper? This burden that the leper carries in his flesh, is this the burden He must carry? Where does this lead? What is this road that He stands upon? The road to Golgotha? Is this the way of the Cross? And so, He says to the Leper, "I do will it!" And He stretches out His sacred hand and He touches that which is unclean and makes it clean. He saves the man.

It doesn't say how He touches the man...that's left to our imagination. Perhaps His fingertips rested on the leper's forehead, and a moment is all it took for the force of His miracle to cleanse him. Perhaps He rested His hand on his shoulder, like he was a friend or a brother. Perhaps He placed His palm against the man's cheek, like a father who loves his son. It doesn't say. But this much is clear -- at that moment, heaven and earth were joined together by the touch of God. So, where are we in all of this?

Today, we too will kneel down before Christ and bring to Him our petitions, our lives, our joys, our sadness and our hopes. And, if we are well disposed, we will say, "If You wish, You can make me clean." We will say, "Thy will be done." And then, by the miracle of God's love, we can witness the victory of the Cross.

When the priest holds up the host and says, "Behold," we will see how our lives can be made whole by the sacrifice of the One who freely carried the burden of our flesh and our souls. Who died that we might have eternal life. And, if we are well disposed, we will receive Him into our own bodies and He will touch our hearts.

And He will say to us, "I do will it, be made clean." And we will be made clean.

~Dcn. Tom