6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Br. Samuel Springuel

14 February, 2021

1st Reading Leviticus 13:1–2,44–46
Responsorial Psalm Psalm 32:1–2,5,11
2nd Reading 1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1
Gospel Mark 1:40–45

Leprosy was a scary disease in ancient times. First it disfigured the individual, causing white splotches on the skin and even causing flesh to slough off in the most severe cases. A person with leprosy was easily marked out and identified. Second, the disease was known to be contagious, though given the state of medical knowledge at the time, no one really knew how. Coming into contact with a leprous person might mean that you yourself contracted leprosy. Third, there was no known cure for the disease and at least some of those who contracted it never recovered. Finally, those who got the disease didn’t die, thereby removing the threat of contagion, but rather could and did live for years, even decades, with the condition. Indeed, individuals with leprosy could be otherwise quite healthy and thus active within their communities, potentially increasing the number of people with whom they came into contact on a daily basis.

Given all this, it’s not surprising that many ancient societies, including the ancient Hebrews, developed rules for identifying leprosy and undertaking the one known measure that could protect the larger society, if not the unfortunate individual who had contracted the disease: quarantine. These quarantine measures could, and sometimes did, include forced confinement or ostracization: leper colonies. This is something we like to think of ourselves as having moved beyond. After all, we have much better medical knowledge, we can actually cure leprosy now. What we conveniently forget is that this cure is very recent. So recent, that the leper colony on the Kalaupapa peninsula, where St. Damian of Moloka’i ministered and died, is technically still open because the patients who were committed to it were guaranteed housing for life, and there are still a half-dozen or so patients alive. They may have been cured of their leprosy, but their disfigurements from the disease persist, making their reintegration into society difficult. Even with a cure readily available, someone with obvious signs of leprosy isn’t readily accepted by modern society.

And look at how we’ve reacted to COVID-19. In some places, those who have contracted the virus, or are even simply suspected of having been exposed
to it, have been shunned and abused by those afraid of the virus. There has been a significant increase in stigma and discrimination against individuals of Asian descent because of the virus’s association with China. Chinese restaurants, for example, have seen a greater loss of business due to the pandemic than other restaurants in the same area.

Or consider the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. They are forced into camps around the world: on Lesbos in Greece, in Bangladesh, Mexico, the Sudan, Morocco, Yemen, Palestine, and countless other places. Men, women, and children who are the victims of war, famine, and corruption are forced to live in tent cities or make-shift encampments so that the “normal people” of the region can go about their ordinary lives undisturbed by the troubles of these “dangerous foreigners.” There isn’t even the excuse of medical necessity in these instances. These people are treated as if the poverty and suffering that they are experiencing are contagious and so we must confine them to protect ourselves. This is further reinforced by political narratives about immigrants “stealing our jobs” or “becoming a burden on society.”

Or what about the fate of the incarcerated? Cast into prison, sometimes hundreds or even thousands of miles from their families and communities, these people are cut off from society on the pretext that such treatment is just punishment for the crimes they committed. They aren’t people, they’re criminals who barely deserve the 3 hots and a cot that prison provides for them. And when they get out, having supposedly served their time and paid their debt to society? Even then their conviction follows them around and drags them down like an anchor in the sea. Applications for jobs, apartments, loans, and countless other things that would allow them to function in society ask about past convictions and they are disqualified almost as a matter of course for answering “yes.”

No, we are not far removed from the leper colonies of old. Not removed at all. The attitudes that created them are alive and well, if redirected at more “acceptable” targets.

This is what makes Jesus’s action so significant, not just in his time, but for us as well. When encountering the leper, the outcast whom society viewed with fear and loathing, Jesus did not recoil. He did not look the other way or pretend he hadn’t seen or heard the man. He saw a child of God in need of help. He felt pity and was moved to action. He reached out and touched him, at once acknowledging his value, his dignity as a person, and accepting him as a person worthy of human contact. And finally, he healed him: repaired the physical damage the leprosy had caused, but more importantly welcomed him back into the common society of men. No more was the man to be an outcast, to be set apart as unclean, unable to enjoy family, friendship, or even simple human company from those not also afflicted with the dread disease. The stigma which leprosy had placed upon him was removed and he was made whole.

In a few moments, we will celebrate the sacrament of the Body of Christ. We will receive the gift of Christ’s own body. And this is given to us not simply for our benefit. To paraphrase St. Augustine, we receive the Body of Christ so that we may more truly become the Body of Christ. It is through us, with our
hands, that Jesus’s ministry continues today. If we receive the Body of Christ from this altar, and then refuse to recognize the humanity, the dignity in those around us, then the meaning of this sacrifice is lost on us. We will have denied the efficacious reality of what we have participated in, and set ourselves on the road to Hell. We will be amongst those who will hear the dread words, “Truly, I do not know you.”

Let this never be the case. As we receive from the altar, let us answer the call to be the Body of Christ and share his compassion and mercy with the outcast, the poor, the needy. Let us welcome them into our hearts, into our communities, into our lives. For they are God’s children, and our brothers and sisters.