

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Today's readings revolve around healing and belief. Jesus risks touching a diseased man in order to heal him, while Paul talks about the challenges of conscience in a world of differing beliefs. The invitation here is to be open to the call to trust that God is at work amid our fear of difference and "otherness" and our fear of the darkness within ourselves.

The Lord calls us to bring our weakness and our failings to him, for he is full of mercy for everyone who turn to him.

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46 The book of Leviticus shows us the practical implications of the Law of Moses. At a time when people had no defence against virulent diseases, rules were laid down which excluded people with skin diseases from wider society - for the protection of the whole people.

1 Corinthians 10:31 – 11:1 Paul is talking to early Christians about how to behave when dining with pagans. Paul balances the freedom of the Spirit, which no longer requires strict adherence to the Law of Moses, and the need to avoid shocking the consciences of other people.

Mark 1:40-45 Jesus heals a man with a virulent skin disease and puts himself at risk of being rendered ritually unclean in the process. There is nothing any of us could ever do that Jesus would not be willing to heal, at whatever cost to himself.

Reflection



“Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.”

Not many of us knew what it was like to be afraid of touching someone or being touched by someone until the onset of the coronavirus early in 2020. One moment we were all willing to be herded together buses, planes or crowded cinemas or restaurants, sharing sitting space and breathing space, up close and personal. Then

almost overnight, it seemed, other people became a dangerous enemy, potential disease-carriers, killers unawares. New concepts came into common vocabulary like “social distancing” and “the lockdown”. We sheltered in our homes which became fortresses, closed to other people. We had “safe distances” marked out in supermarket queues and other places to avoid contact.

Jesus would have been familiar with all these fears. For people at his time, any contact with someone who had a skin disease meant inevitable contamination, either physical or ritual. The diseased person, the “leper” was a figure of dread and fear, at a time when there weren’t many reliable medical remedies. You stayed clean or you died, simple as that.



Small wonder, then, that the man with a skin disease was wary about Jesus’ willingness to come near him. Yet he also had faith that God could bring the gift of healing to him, “If you want to” he said, “you can cure me.” Jesus feels compassion for him and does completely the opposite to what makes sense. Anyone with a knowledge of contagion would shrink from a person so obviously diseased, but Jesus actively goes towards him and stretches out his hand to touch him. “Of course I want to!” It’s the opposite of the survival instinct. Jesus is

willing to go into the darkest and most fearful places that human beings can find themselves in. There are no “no go” areas for Jesus, not even death itself. He is willing to come into the memories and experiences that we would most deeply like to hide - in order to free us from the darkness that they contain.

We don't just fear physical contagion. For a lot of people there is an instinctive shrinking from whoever is thought to be “other”, whether it be in cultural terms or in terms of morality and lifestyle. It's as if we fear that we will be contaminated by a different way of thinking or behaving. It's so much easier to judge and to erect barriers: them and us, insiders and outsiders, the virtuous and sinners. Jesus tells some powerful stories about this, for example the Pharisee praying, “I thank you, God, that I am not like other people...” In St Paul's time it was common for formerly Jewish Christians to worry about mixing with former pagans Christians in the new Christian community. Paul tries to be culturally sensitive. He doesn't want to impose burdens on the conscience of anyone. But he also stresses the freedom of the children of God.

It is not for us to stand in judgement on other people. Rather, we've got to mirror the welcome of Jesus even for people whose beliefs or practices we find strange or shocking. This isn't to say, “anything goes”. But it is to proclaim the Christian belief that everyone can find a home in the family of Jesus. Our first task is to keep the door to this family home wide open, to make space for other people to come in in God's own time and way, however “other” they may seem to us.



"The leprosy left him at once and he was cured."

Pope Francis teaches this powerfully in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Joy of the Gospel”, where he reminds us that the Eucharist is “not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak”. He goes on, “the Church is

not a customs house; it is the house of the Father, where there's room for everyone, with all their problems".

It is not for us to judge, but to recognise our own sinfulness and to offer the same welcome and compassion that we hope to receive ourselves. That's why forgiveness is at the heart of the prayer Jesus taught us. He puts the grace of forgiving and being forgiven alongside daily survival itself. Daily bread and daily forgiveness are his recipe for spiritual health, but the choice is ours. It is easy to highlight the faults of other people, while being blind to our own sinfulness. At the heart of Jesus' teaching is mercy and compassion: he is willing to heal us of all our darkness, but are we willing to open up that darkness to his healing touch? And are we willing to become healers in our turn?



In Italy, spring (primavera) begins in the middle of February. That is when the first shoots of plants and flowers spring up and when birds begin their mating. Humans also celebrated the spring and looked for a mate with whom to pair off. by association with the "lovebirds" of early spring! This coincided with the ancient pagan festival of Lupercalia and the Church, always keen to 'canonise' pagan feasts, pointed out that it was also the feast of a Roman martyr named Valentine who was martyred on that date in AD 269. Stories about the martyr were even embellished to fit in with the idea of romantic love.

St Valentine's bones are in our Franciscan Church of Blessed John Duns Scotus in The Gorbals in Glasgow.

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