

6th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME YEAR B HOMILY ESSENDON 2021
WITH EMPATHY, JESUS REACHES OUT TO TOUCH AND HEAL THE UNCLEAN
AFFLICTED

Mk 1.40-45

Lev 13.1-2,44-46

1Cor 10.31-11.1

Well, here we are again in lockdown, back to square one, but hopefully just for the week, and not another 8 months! Frustrating as it all is, it's best to be careful and attentive, as can't we see the insidious coronavirus is still sneaking around out there, ready to replicate and infect. And so we continue to tread carefully.

Perhaps you and I have had a slightly heightened sense of how the poor leper felt, when we think back to the initial phase of the earlier lockdown, wearing masks even outdoors, as we're back to right now, feeling a bit isolated and even a bit unclean! I remember being out for a walk, coming back down the narrow lane nearby, and someone coming down the other way reversing and disappearing out the other end to get out of my way, or just to avoid me! And there were people stepping away or crossing the road to avoid closer contact with each other, in passing by. This sense even endured as you were asked to decontaminate or sanitise the space where you were sitting in church. (My celebrant's chair didn't matter so much, as I was the only one to be sitting on it!)

And we are finally at the end of Chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel, with Jesus having had a very busy first day out on the long and winding road or path, finally encountering an untouchable, a leper of some sort, whom people feared because of potential infection or at least ritual contamination, as well as being repulsed by physical appearances. Leprosy was ill-defined and certainly not understood back there, with it apparently referring to any kind of scaly skin disease, from the disfigurement of psoriasis, favus or seborrheic dermatitis, according to the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, which was sounding like a *Gray's Anatomy* or something out of a medical encyclopedia!!

Leviticus today reflects the legal prescriptions for ostracizing the afflicted person, who must even cry out unclean about his or her condition, and stay apart from the ordinary people, exiled to live outside the camp. The presumption too, which made it easier to justify was that such a person must have done something wrong to incur God's anger and resulting punishment, so buckpassing was easily done onto the poor victim, who only had oneself to blame. So, the thinking was simplistic and judgemental: Bad luck! Go away and suffer on your own; you must have deserved it. This was hardly a great way of boosting one's self-esteem!! The poor chap in today's story was pretty game to even approach Jesus, but presumably his leap forward was a sign of his desperation and faith in Jesus.

Whatever, it was unsightly and off-putting, even horrifying, to any observer. Jesus, however, hesitates not in reaching out to the poor man who approaches him in faith and drops to his knees before him. As Frank Moloney SDB puts it: *"This is an act of ritual impurity, as well of as of human foolhardiness. When one adds Jesus' words to this remarkable action, there is a sense of profoundly reassuring use of an authority to bring goodness, health and peace... Faced with the consequences of evil: sickness, taboo, prejudice, hatred, segregation and misunderstanding, we are asked to be moved into action... War, famine, segregation and intense human suffering proliferate. As Christians, we have something to bring to this world."*

Claude Mostowick MSC speaks of his experience in providing pastoral care for HIV/AIDS sufferers, and the way in which some critics (of the Pharisee variety!) negatively judged and shunned such people, again even with the simplistic and wrong attitude of God's punishment coming down upon them, as if they deserved it. He states: *"In December 2020, after leading and preaching at a memorial service for people who have died of HIV/AIDS in the last 40 years, and who had been made to feel outside the community. Another Christian group named this as a disgrace. I remember how so many of the people in the 1980's and 1990's were shunned and cast off, except by compassionate volunteer carers, the Sisters of Charity and other, mostly women, congregations."* And do you remember seeing Princess Diana reaching out to hug such people, knowing it was not contagious through such contact. Then there is also the striking image of Pope Francis hugging a facially disfigured man, afflicted with the Elephant Man syndrome, in St Peter's Square, in imitation of Jesus' outreach today, the difference being Francis couldn't offer physical healing, but certainly spiritual comfort, acceptance and peace of mind.

This, of course, is not to encourage foolish risk-taking, when we know infectiousness is rampant. Precautions are essential, but this is not to deny the need for human contact through presence, encouragement and empathy, not to walk away in ignorance. We need to develop new ways of reaching out. For example, during the long lockdown, faithful parishioner Maureen McCormack was in hospital, suffering from **COVID**, and two of her daughters were present with her dressed up like astronauts, in **PPE** (personal protective equipment) gear, whilst her other children were able to be present on **ZOOM**, one in Singapore and one in Denver Colorado, as I sat at home and led prayers of blessing for her, where she could actually join in with them. It was truly a moment of grace, reassurance, gratitude and comfort for all, even moreso as she died only a day or two later.

Claude also points out that the suffering man in the Gospel was not changed by religious codes or rituals, which were meant to be observed afterwards, but which the victim actually seems to forget, in not reporting back to the priests at the Temple, but through the presence and compassion of Jesus, through his healing and comforting touch and his words of encouragement. As Brendan Byrne SJ see it, prior to the poor man's encounter with Jesus: "*The sufferer appears condemned to a living death in social as well as physical terms.*" Once again, we have a call for outreach, welcome, inclusion and diversity, without barriers of misunderstanding and ignorance, following his way.

john hannon

14th February 2021