

## SPIRITUALITY

## GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Luke 7:16

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

A great prophet has arisen in our  
midst,

God has visited his people.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

## Gospel

Mark 1:40-45; L77B

A leper came to Jesus 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.Then, warning him sternly, he  
dismissed him at once.He said to him, "See that you tell no  
one anything,  
but go, show yourself to the priest  
and offer for your cleansing what  
Moses prescribed;  
that will be proof for them."The man went away and began to  
publicize the whole matter.He spread the report abroad  
so that it was impossible for Jesus to  
enter a town openly.He remained outside in deserted  
places,  
and people kept coming to him from  
everywhere.

## Reflecting on the Gospel

The leprosy about which the first reading and the gospel speak today is not to be confused with contemporary Hansen's disease, medically identified only in 1868 by the Norwegian scientist Gerhard Hansen. A number of conditions, especially those with the signs of scaly skin, swellings, and exuding bodily fluids, are described as "leprosy" in this Sunday's first reading from the book

of Leviticus. Skin that flaked off, fluids that were un-naturally exuded from the body, were considered to be conditions that violated religious-cultural boundaries connected with the integrity, and therefore holiness, of the human body, and so were considered to diminish the worth of the person. People with such conditions were banished from the community, compelled to cry "Unclean!" and make themselves obviously disheveled so that others would avoid them. To be "unclean" was also regarded as a moral failing and therefore sinful. The person who came into contact with such an afflicted one was regarded as contaminated and as ritually unclean and as adding to the moral pollution of the very gregarious Middle Eastern society.

Leprosaria and Hansen's disease still exist in some parts of the world, but social and religious alienation because of other causes is sadly much more familiar. Who are today's "lepers," people whom some consider as "polluting" the homogeneous and often exclusive society by their differences in race, culture, social mores, or physical and intellectual disabilities? The

attitudes of the Nazis to the Jews, the Hutus to the Tutsis, the second people to the first and indigenous people of a land, are bred by a "leper" mindset. What are our attitudes to those we might consider as weakening the moral fiber of society—the drug addicts, the HIV/AIDS sufferers, those in prison? Are we on the side of harsh, punitive justice or compassionate restorative justice? And do we consider that the pollution of our planet, by us, can be sinful?

In the gospel, Jesus is approached by a leper. He makes no attempt to move away from him. What he is moved by is compassion, the deep gut-wrenching response that identifies with the suffering of another, and his hand stretches out to touch the man and affirm his choice to heal him. How long had it been since the leper had felt the touch of another human being on his diseased flesh, had heard words of affirmation rather than insult? We should be more enlightened about the importance of touch—the holding of the hand of the seriously ill or dying person, the silent embrace of the bereaved. Yet for some people there is the almost hysterical avoidance of touching the HIV/AIDS sufferer, or of drinking from the communion chalice lest, contrary to all medical opinion, one might be infected by this. Jesus's compassion and humanity bridge the gap between the holy and the unclean, freedom and taboos, sickness and health.

Jesus tells the man to observe the Mosaic Law by showing himself to a priest for the confirmation of his healing, and to offer a public sacrifice, an act of worship from which his leprosy had excluded him. By this instruction Jesus shows that he respects the Mosaic teaching, even though he will soon clash with some of the scribes' interpretation of this. Ironically, the man now goes around publicly and freely, while Jesus must leave the town and go into the country to es-



cape his unwanted publicity. Because he has touched the leper, according to the Law Jesus is also regarded as unclean and excluded. He has taken upon himself another's infirmity; in his passion and death he will be the Suffering Servant who bears all our infirmities and transgressions for the sake of our salvation (cf. Isa 53:4-5). Yet people still come to him, caring nothing for his "infection" and everything for his miraculous power. As those who come to Jesus, what are we seeking from him? Do we want to be infected with his compassion or with the miraculous? How does Jesus touch us—and how do we touch others?

**Focusing the Gospel**

**Key words and phrases:** Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, / touched him.

**To the point:** Jesus reaches out to touch the leper, one who had been rendered ritually impure or "unclean" due to his skin infection. There are many aspects to the ritual purity system in place at the time of Jesus. One effect of the system, as explained by Jewish scholar Jonathan Klawans, was to "force a separation between the experience of encountering God's sanctity and matters pertaining to death . . . Because God is eternal, God does not die . . . by following the ritual purity regulations ancient Israelites separated themselves from what made them least God-like" (*The Jewish Study Bible*, "Concepts of Purity in the Bible," 2,044). In Jesus, true God and true man, we find a perfect marriage of the human and the divine. Jesus, Son of God, the source of all purity, touches the man, heals his leprosy, and restores him to health and to his place in the community. Again, Jesus reveals himself as the savior, sent by the Father not to condemn the world but to redeem it (John 3:17).

**Connecting the Gospel**

**to the first reading:** In the first reading from Leviticus we find some of the rules and regulations put in place to protect the community as a whole from becoming ritually impure due to contact with a person rendered "unclean" by leprosy. The reading from Leviticus ends with the declaration that any person determined to be unclean from a skin ailment "shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp." In the gospel, Jesus heals the man with leprosy and restores him to the community, but at the end it is Jesus who must dwell apart "in deserted places" due to the publicity that the healing has generated.

**to experience:** Throughout his life, Jesus seeks out and draws near to those on the margins. How does your faith community minister to those who dwell on the edges of society and who are in the greatest need of support and inclusion?

**Connecting the Responsorial Psalm**

**to the readings:** The leper approaches Jesus and tells him, "If you wish, you can make me clean." In these simple words the man names both who he is and who he believes Jesus to be. He acknowledges his own affliction while also asserting Jesus's power to cleanse and to heal. Today's psalm offers us much the same framework for reconciliation, first in revealing oneself truthfully to God ("I acknowledged my sin to you / my guilt I covered not") and then lifting up God's power to restore ("you took away my guilt").

**to psalmist preparation:** The season of Lent will soon be upon us; what sin or weakness is God calling you to bring before him so that he might take it away and bring healing?

**PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING**

In the first reading from Leviticus we hear of people with leprosy being ostracized from the community due to fear over their disease. Which groups in your community face ostracism and isolation due to fear?

The responsorial psalm lifts up the joy to be found in the Lord, even in the midst of trouble. Where do you experience the most joy in your life at this moment?

St. Paul urges the Corinthians to "do everything for the glory of God." How does your parish community live out this command?

We hear that Jesus is "moved with pity" at the plight of the leper and reaches out to touch him, breaking the law of the time. How as Christians shall we respond when laws, rules, or regulations stand in the way of compassion?