

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."

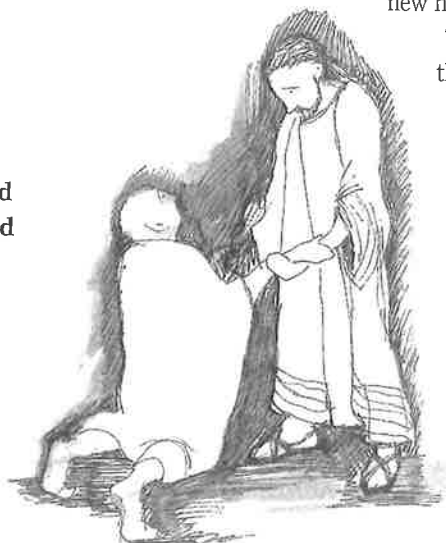
Moved with pity, he
stretched out his
hand,
touched him, and
said to him,
"I do will it. Be made
clean."

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

After many weeks we have come to the conclusion of the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. What a whirlwind it has been. From the opening sentence announcing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, son of God, to John the Baptist, the calling of disciples, casting out demons, healing the sick, including Simon's mother-in-law, preaching in synagogues, and now concluding with the healing of someone with a skin disease, the story has been like riding a roller coaster. We reach new heights and move swiftly from episode to episode.

Though our English Bibles refer to the person cured as a "leper," the term means anyone with a skin disease. An entire chapter in the book of Leviticus (13) is dedicated to diagnosing and treating skin diseases, which were broadly categorized in the ancient world as "leprosy." Verses 45-46 of that chapter in Leviticus discuss how the person with the disease is to behave, namely, by crying "unclean, unclean" before approaching others, and living apart from the community for as long as the infection lasts.

So the healing performed by Jesus is not merely a healing of the skin disease, though it is certainly that. By telling the man to show himself to the priest, Jesus is, in effect, setting up the situation so the man will be brought back into community. Once the priest declares the infection gone, the afflicted person may return as a full-fledged member of the people, without having to cry out "unclean, unclean" as he goes about his business.

It is for this reason, among others, that scholars and preachers say that Jesus' ministry was about inclusion. He ministered to those on the margins, or even outside of the community, like this person with a skin disease, and Jesus made them whole. Once whole, the excluded persons could be welcomed back.

Interestingly, even though Jesus warned the man sternly and ordered him not to tell anyone (aside from the priest), the cured man publicized the matter widely! And this publicity affected Jesus' ministry so that he was no longer able to enter towns openly. It's as though Jesus were being stalked by the ancient equivalent of the paparazzi. He was not even left alone in the "deserted places" outside the villages.

By the end of the first chapter of Mark the stage has been set. What will happen to this wonder-worker? Will his fame spread beyond the backwater of Galilee? Who else on the margins or outskirts of society will he embrace? What kind of whirlwind will this be?

Living the Paschal Mystery

Sometimes the news is so good we can't keep it to ourselves. This might happen when someone is getting married, or having a baby, or is out of the hospital after a long illness. Our joy cannot be contained and so it was with the man afflicted with a skin disease. Even though Jesus himself told him to keep it quiet, that was simply not possible. He told everyone! The news spread throughout the region, and Jesus was left to live with the consequences. Why was the cured man so joyful? Not only because the affliction was cured, but now he was able to be restored to the community. No longer would he have to shout "unclean, unclean" before approaching anyone. Now he was whole and an integral part of the people.

Whom do we see excluded today? What is today's equivalent of an ancient skin condition? Are there groups or individuals who are effectively precluded

with shouts of “unclean!”? Jesus’ desire is not merely to heal the man’s skin, but to restore him to the group. In effect, the healing of the leper was as much for the community as it was for the leper. The community had rejected this person and would not accept him with that condition. If we want to be like Jesus we can find those on the margins and bring them into the fold. We may not have the power to heal physical ailments, but we can certainly reach out to the marginalized and draw them close.

Focusing the Gospel

Mark 1:40-45

The cleansing of the leper is a climactic moment in Mark’s gospel. By just touching the leper Jesus challenges one of the strictest proscriptions in Jewish society (today’s first reading provides the context for understanding the social and religious revulsion of lepers).

The leper is one of the heroic characters of Mark’s gospel (along with such figures as the poor widow who gives her only penny to the temple and the blind Bartimaeus). The leper places his entire trust in Jesus. For him, there is no doubt: this Jesus is the Messiah of hope, the Lord of life. His request for healing is more than a cry for help—it is a profession of faith: “you can make me clean.”

Jesus’ curing of the leper shocked those who witnessed it. Jesus did not drive the leper away, as would be the norm (the leper, according to the Mosaic law, had no right to even address Jesus); instead, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. Jesus did not see an unclean leper but a human being in desperate need.

Consider what Jesus does after healing the leper. He sends the cleansed leper to show himself to the priest “and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed.” This leper’s healing is a sign to the Jewish establishment, represented by the priest: that the Messiah has come and is present among you.

Focusing the First Reading

Lev 13:1-2, 44-46

As noted above, today’s first reading, from the book of Leviticus, sets forth how “lepers”—those suffering from any kind of skin disease—are to be treated under the law.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Ps 32:1-2, 5, 11 (7)

The second of the seven penitential psalms, Psalm 32 expresses the joy of forgiveness and of being reconciled to God and the community. The psalmist sings his gratitude for the grace to confront one’s sins and the faith to trust in God’s mercy to recreate one’s life in God’s peace.

Focusing the Second Reading

1 Cor 10:31–11:1

A great debate raged in the church of Corinth: After animal sacrifices were offered before Greek idols, the meat often found its way into the marketplace. The more scrupulous believers saw eating such pagan offerings as an affront to the one true God; others thought that eating such meat was harmless and did nothing to undermine a Christian’s faithfulness. In today’s second reading, Paul writes that the matter is too trivial to risk dividing the church. In all things, Paul counsels, respect one another’s viewpoints and perspectives while focusing together on the faith they share in the God revealed to them by Christ Jesus.

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

Who are the “lepers” in our own “villages” who frighten us and cause us to run away, lest somehow we become “contaminated”?

.....

Have you ever felt like a “leper”—segregated, isolated, estranged, misunderstood?

.....

What does it mean to act out of compassion?

.....

Have you ever “wished” to act in a certain way, but did not? Have you ever found yourself in a situation in which God’s presence was unmistakably clear, but you were reluctant or even afraid to acknowledge that presence?

.....