

Homily for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2024 Year B

The first reading we have just heard, taken from the book of Leviticus, is very interesting because it gives us an insight into the mentality of the time.

To be a leper was bad enough; to have contracted this slow wasting contagious disease not only meant that you died a slow death, but it also meant that you had to live apart from the rest of the community, either in total isolation, or with small groups of other lepers. But there was an additional stigma attached. It was widely believed that if you were unfortunate enough to be sick or disfigured in any way it was because of your sins. Physical illness was an outward sign of internal moral guilt, and that was partly why the priests had an important ritual part to play in the cleansing process, confirming the healing and admitting the person back into the community once more.

It would be the easiest thing in the world to say that we do not think like that anymore, and that modern medicine has given us a clear understanding of the causes of disfigurement and disease. That of course is true, but having said that, nothing is that black and white. Look at the Aids crisis for example. Fear has made many people treat like those who have Aids just like lepers, and there is always the quick assumption that it is all because of a sinful way of life. In some circumstances that may be true, but in many cases it is not. The point is in that the making of moral judgements about people is best left to God. Outward appearances can be very misleading. Only God can clearly and unambiguously see the state of one's heart.

Then in today's Gospel we hear about this wonderful character, again a leper, who says with great faith to Christ not, "Please cure me", but with a little emotional blackmail he says, "If you want to I know you can cure me". And it does the trick. Christ could not possibly refuse, and you have those wonderful kind words, "Of course I want to be cured".

Now healing, making the person well again, must deal with the whole person, and so Christ often made the public point have not only healing the person's body, but also the person's soul. He would say to the person, "Your sins are forgiven you". This would enrage the Scribes and the Pharisees. They would accuse Him of blasphemy by saying, "Only God can forgive sins".

Do you remember how Christ dealt with them? He asked them “Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven you”, “Or take up your bed and walk”?

And the obvious answer, of course, was that it was much easier to say, your sins are forgiven you, for it would all happen on the inside and how could you disprove it?

Then Christ, to their utter amazement, would say, “Well to prove to you I have the power to forgive sins, I will do the much more difficult thing, and I will cure the person”, and to the people watching it was a very powerful sign, because if He could take away a person's physical illness or disfigurement, then surely He could also take away the moral guilt, the sin, that they believed caused the disease.

Let us forget about sickness of the body for the moment and think about sickness of the soul. Sin is very much a reality. When we freely choose to sin, we deliberately choose to dwell in isolation, outside the community of grace. We choose a living death rather than life.

But we can never separate ourselves from the love of God, and this love and mercy of Christ's has left us the means of healing the sickness in our souls and to re-enter the community of grace. We achieve this through the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Confession.

Unfortunately, people are going to confession less and less these days, when perhaps it is an age when we need it more and more.

Why is it that when Christ stands before us and says very clearly, “I want to heal your soul, I want to forgive your sins”, that we turn and walk the other way? I suppose there are many reasons.

Over the next few weeks, I will be talking about some of them. But isn't this now a marvellous occasion, at almost the beginning of Lent, to take a close look at our own feelings about confession, and our fears and difficulties and confront them? On Ash Wednesday each of us will be anointed with ashes which are a very powerful symbol of repentance and perhaps we will make resolutions to give up this or that. That is fine, but why not do something positive as well? For example, try to come to a new and fresh understanding of all the real possibilities that exist in the Sacrament of Penance, and then to come to confession. Allow Christ to heal whatever ails your soul.