

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday (B)

12<sup>th</sup> February 2015

'Outcasts and reaching out'

Lev 13: the stigma of leprosy      1Cor 10: never do anything offensive  
Mk 1: 40–45: “ ‘Of course I want to . . . Be cured!’ ”

We're on the brink of Lent, now, and so this is the last Sunday 'of Ordinary Time' until June, after the Easter season. We conclude, today, our reading of the first chapter of St Mark, which we've been hearing from more-or-less ever since the feast of Jesus's Baptism at the beginning of January.

It's a very short passage that we hear today, another healing miracle, but not simply a healing of a man's diseased skin. This encounter represents much more than merely that, marvellous though his physical healing was for the leper. Lepers, as we heard in the first reading, were obliged to live outside the village, away from the community, owing to the contagiousness of the leprosy. This made him an outcast, and a *persona non grata*. The point of Jesus's encounter with this leper in the Gospel — and it's not the only one recorded — is that He goes up to the man, He touches him, rather than avoiding him. The man has been shunned by the community, but he is not

shunned by Jesus. Our Lord gives an example of great openness to the 'outsider.' So, whilst it's a healing of the man's leprosy, it's more significantly an emotional healing for him, in that he can return to civilized life; he is welcomed back into his family and friendship group, and can return to the synagogue worship. Now, admittedly, in Jesus's day, with limited medical knowledge, one can understand the actions of a community to limit itself to the ravages of a contagious disease, and to separate themselves off from those with the illness. Yet Jesus overcame this distancing, and reached out to the man himself. We can think of saints who have followed this example bravely: St Aloysius Gonzaga, the Jesuit who worked in the plague hospitals of 16<sup>th</sup> c. Rome; and St Damien, the Belgian missionary who worked in the Hawaiiin Islands in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and ministered at the leper colony on Molokai. Each of them died of the same disease as the people to whom they gave service, but they were not afraid to do that, in order to reach out and save spiritually the souls to whom they felt called.

This has to be the message we receive, surely, from this Gospel passage today: to reach out without fear to those isolated. We need to ask: is Our Lord calling us to minister in some way, great or small, to someone who has become separated from family, or has become lonely through old age? Alternatively, is there anyone cut off from us through argument or long-running tension? Isn't it time to follow Our Lord's lead, and reach out across that awkward divide, heal and mend that relationship? In some cases we need to be brave. When Pope Benedict canonized St Damien of Molokai 5yrs ago, he said this:

"Not without fear and loathing, Father Damien made the choice to go on the island of Molokai in the service of lepers who were there, abandoned by all. So he exposed himself to the disease of which they suffered. With them he felt at home. The servant of the Word became a suffering servant, leper with the lepers, during the last four years of his life."

We, too, when we are reaching out across emotional divides, extending a hand of friendship to those otherwise cut off from the community for whatever reason, have to have the courage of Christ. Just as to the leper who asked Him, "If You want to, You can cure me," Jesus said, "Of

course I want to," so we also need to have that certainty that comes from following Jesus: "of course I want to" ... Of course I want to reach across that barrier and bring them back into community with me and with others. Of course I want to ... even if it's hard. Of course I want to ... but I need God's grace.

Maybe we should each take a moment now to think. Is there someone I should be reaching out to in kindness, that I have neglected? Is there someone — anyone — that I am in conflict with, or misunderstanding, or tension, or simply lacked the time to contact? How am I going to deal with that? How am I going to take it forward, in a Christ-like way, reaching out in faith and courage, without mistrust or lack of charity? Make it a prayer now ... Make it your prayer of this Holy Mass, that Our Lord will show you how to do that; and will give you the love to act on it.

*St Aloysius Gonzaga, pray for us ... St Damien of Molokai, pray for us, and help us to imitate the Lord Jesus in actually reaching out to those we have isolated; in bringing healing to those otherwise neglected.*