

6th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Mark 1:40-45

Our Lord's engagement with the leper is a reflection of His engagement with all that is ugly and repulsive and sickening in our world and in us. Any person that went near a leper was treated as a leper and that meant living in the garbage dumps of the towns and villages and going about with a bell around one's neck or shouting out "unclean" to warn others that they were approaching. Leprosy, a name for a variety of skin disorders, was treated as a punishment from God for one's own sins or the sins of one's family. The leper was nothing more than pollution that infested towns and villages and had to be gotten rid of.

If Our Lord were like the men and women of His time then He would have run from the leper lest He become unclean. And if He did so no one would have regarded Him with any less respect because it was the natural thing to do, the right thing to do. But then this the point of the Incarnation, the point of our faith, that nothing remains the same. Evil must be confronted with love, sin confronted with reconciliation, injustice confronted with forgiveness.

The compassion with which Christ was moved is so much more than the word suggests. It comes from the Greek word, σπλανχνηνιστηεις (splachnistheis), from the word for "guts." It literally means that Our Lord's guts turned inside out from the pain he felt for this man. It isn't a matter of pity or of feeling sorry for this man or of having sympathy or empathy. It is a matter of Our Lord's whole being been wrenched inside out because of the suffering and sadness which he saw in the leper.

This poor man alienated and marginalised by law, separated from his family and his friends and his home, saw in Our Lord a man so close to God that simply by His will, simply by His wanting, he could be cured. It is a

remarkable testimony of faith amidst so much desperation. Could we imagine a man or woman today believing that simply by a word that he or she would be healed of cancer or heart disease or even of the mental illnesses that enslave so many people? But this is what we profess to believe at every Mass and what we shall soon say, because at the elevation of the Host and Chalice by the Priest at the *Agnus Dei*, the “Lamb of God,” we all say, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed”. This isn’t simply a reply to the Priest’s words, but an expression of the deep longing that we share with the leper to be healed of all that isolates us and alienates us and marginalises us from one another, from ourselves, and from God.

That Word of God is the answer to our prayers even today. It is the Word that we long for in the silence that so many feel in prayer. That silence of God which feels like God’s abandonment and our isolation has been filled by Our Lord who is the Word of God. That is why it is so important that we return daily to the Bible, to read the Word of God, to immerse ourselves in the stories and the lives of these people who lived 2,000 years ago and more, because our lives are an echo of theirs—and if we listen we will hear the Word of God speaking just as He spoke so long ago. Because He didn’t speak just to those people, He spoke to all people in all places and in all times, and in the Gospels read in Church and at home, He goes on speaking.