

6TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

1 Corinthians 10:31 to 11:1

Mark 1:40-45

HOMILY

When I was growing up there was an outbreak of smallpox and I was one of the victims.

I remember how my mother and I had to isolate from the village compound to a makeshift shelter right in the bush for weeks until all the smallpox cleared. There, from the abundance of the forest my mother gave me several herbal hot baths - which was the only treatment I got: no pain killers and the lot. One of the more distressing impacts of the Coronavirus has been the experience of social isolation. Hopefully, we can begin to look forward to a time when we can interact with one another in a more natural and human way.

In the time of Jesus, leprosy was the most isolating of all diseases. The leper had to live outside the camp, away from the normal places where people interact. Not only were lepers socially isolated, but they were religiously isolated. The leper in the Gospel of today breaks out of his isolation to approach Jesus: *'If you want to, you can cure me.'* The emotion ascribed to Jesus in the gospel reading suggests a deeply rooted, gut wrenching, reaction to the leper, a mixture of anger and compassion. This deep seated, emotional, response to the man finds Jesus doing the unthinkable.

Having spoken to the leper, he then touched him. With that touch the leper must have realized that he was being released from his isolation. We might wonder how long it had been since the leper had felt the touch of another human being. By that touch, Jesus was revealing that this is not what God wanted for him. The touch of Jesus was the touch of God. Jesus reveals a God who does not exclude anyone. Jesus shows that in the heart of God there is room for everyone, especially for those who have been made to feel that they do not belong. Leprosy is not the frightening disease today that it was in the time of Jesus, as it can be treated and cured. Yet, in every age, society has a tendency to decide who is acceptable and who is out of favour. We continue to relegate some people to the side-lines for a whole variety of reasons, perhaps because we see them as a threat to us or as a burden on us or just because they are different from us.

The gospel reading today raises the question of what Jesus wants. I think we can say with certainty that the Lord wants to work through each one of us to rescue people from their sense of isolation.

He wants the miracle of today's gospel to become a contemporary reality, through our willingness to befriend those who are isolated or who find themselves on the margins of acceptability for whatever reason.