

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-FEBRUARY 14, 2021

**READINGS: Leviticus 13:1-2, 45-46;
Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 32;
1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1;
Gospel of Mark 1:40-45**

Jesus accepted the rejected and so should we

We begin today's reflection with a couple of questions. Have you ever been asked to quarantine during this COVID-19 pandemic? How did it feel? Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Government has implemented an Emergency Order under the Quarantine Act that requires persons entering Canada to quarantine or self-isolate themselves for 14 days if they are asymptomatic for COVID-19. We must also quarantine if we have had a close contact with someone who has or is suspected of having COVID-19, or if we have been told by public health authorities that we may have been exposed to COVID-19. Quarantine means that we stay home, and we cannot leave home even to go and do shopping. When we quarantine, we must not come into contact with other members of the community. We are not to be seen in public. We are required to separate ourselves from the community throughout the 14-day period. The purpose of quarantine is to prevent the spread of the disease in our communities.

On this Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, the readings describe stories of similar situations of isolation in which people are separated from the community due to other forms of sickness. We begin with the first reading from the Book of Leviticus. Leviticus is the Book that deals almost exclusively with the Law. The Book gets its name after the tribe of Levi, from which the priests came. The priests would be the ones to implement the Law. The Book therefore focuses on the ministry of the Levite priests. The parts of the Law contained in the Book of Leviticus serve to teach the Israelites that they should always keep themselves in a state of legal purity, or external sanctity as a sign of their intimate union with the Lord. In fact, a refrain in the Book is that the Lord's people shall be holy, because the Lord is holy.

Today's reading is a section of the Book that deals with the Law of purity, specifically with contagious diseases such as leprosy. Leprosy came to be seen as a divine punishment. This reinforced the concept of lepers as among the "living dead". Ritual cleanliness was necessary for the worship of God and so lepers were considered religiously unclean. The determination of the state of the disease belonged to the priest, not as a physician but as a judge and an interpreter of the Law. Once a diagnosis of leprosy had been made, individuals had to separate themselves from the community. People who suffered from leprosy would be considered unclean as long as the disease persisted. Lepers had to follow a dress code-- torn and dirty clothes and were required to keep an untidy appearance. They had to warn others by crying out "unclean". Lepers were treated with dismay. They

were considered outcasts and they lived outside the town. People were afraid of lepers and strictly avoided coming in contact with them.

The first reading on the Law as related to leprosy forms the backdrop to the Gospel reading from Mark. Today's passage is the continuation of the passage we read last Sunday about Jesus' healing of the suffering. Today's passage begins with: "A man with leprosy came to Jesus". The Evangelist is alerting us to the alarming nature of Jesus' encounter with the leper. Lepers were not allowed to come closer to other people. So, by coming to Jesus, the leper did what was illegal. We can tell from what the leper said to Jesus: "If you choose you can make me clean", that the leper believed that Jesus was capable of healing him. Therefore, the leper decided to do what was forbidden. On the other hand, Jesus' response to the leper's request was not expected of him. Jesus stayed closer to the leper and even touched him to heal him. It is interesting to note that even though Jesus healed the leper, Jesus didn't have the authority to declare the man clean. Therefore he sent the healed man to the priest for further instructions. It was the priest who would admit the man, now clean back into the community of God's people.

We can see the parallels between Jesus' response to suffering in last Sunday's Gospel passage and his response to the leper in today's Gospel passage. However, when we read today's Gospel passage in the light of the first reading we can discern that Jesus did more than just heal the leper. The Evangelist Mark in the beginning of his Gospel identified Jesus as the "Son of God". Last Sunday, we learned that Mark continued to focus on Jesus' identity as the "Son of God" whose mission was to proclaim the good news accompanied with deeds of power such as healing.

So, what was the intention of the Evangelist for today's story about Jesus' encounter with the leper? Perhaps the second reading will give us some insight into the interpretation of today's Gospel passage. Today's passage from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians begins with, "Brothers and sisters: whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God". Before this passage Paul had addressed the question of whether or not it was permissible for a Christian to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. The food sacrificed for idols was sold in the market. Paul taught the early Christians that there was really nothing wrong with eating whatever was sold in the market. However, if a person with whom one was eating pointed out that eating food sacrificed to idols was against that person's conscience, then, out of respect for the other, the Corinthian should refrain from eating such food. According to Paul acting lovingly to another person was more important than exercising one's own freedom. In today's passage Paul continued to emphasize the importance of community building in the early Church. He exhorted the Corinthians to be sensitive to the needs of those around them.

In today's Gospel passage, the Evangelist used the story of Jesus's encounter with the leper to carry a message. The message was about God's love to all people. Lepers were unloved, and not considered to belong to God's community because of their religious uncleanness. The Law didn't protect the lepers. They had no hope of

receiving love, no hope of being accepted as persons and no hope of enjoying human relationships in the community. Jesus did for the leper what the Law could not do: Jesus brought the man back into the community. Jesus' action was based on his preaching of the good news of God's redemptive love to all people. He made the man clean to so that he could be welcomed back into the life of the community of God's people. From what we read today about lepers, we can discern that the exclusion of the leper from community caused distress and anxiety.

At the beginning of the homily, we reflected on two questions. We might have read stories about how quarantine poses challenges to those who have been asked to quarantine. The stories tell us that quarantine may make us feel excluded from the community: we cannot do what other people can. Quarantine may make us feel that we don't belong to the community. Nobody wants to feel excluded. Yet, although we are certainly not living in the age of leprosy, we may still bring our fear and social exclusion to bear on those individuals and groups that we do not like for one reason or another. We may treat these individuals and groups as our "lepers" today. Perhaps we hear our own hearts crying out "Unclean! Unclean!" when we come across such individuals or groups.

Today's readings and Jesus' response to the leper teach us that wholeness of the life of a believing community is reflected in the wholeness of the life of every individual. As we are about to enter into the Season of Lent, let us ask God to teach us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Let us learn to welcome those who are rejected in our communities. When we learn to accept those whom we have rejected or those whom society has rejected, we build a loving community that reflects the dignity and value of everyone.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

Please note that this homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance.