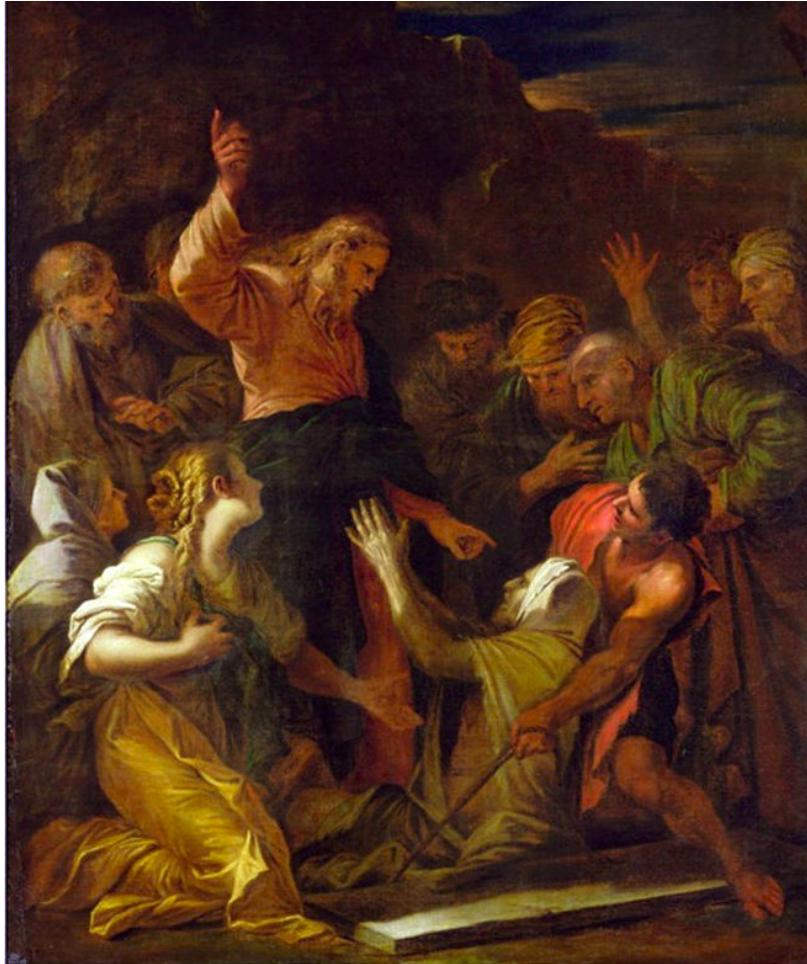


the Sunday Readings



Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand & touched him & said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" (Mk.1:41)

6th Sunday Ordinary Time

6th SUNDAY ORDINARY TIME

*returning to communion*¹

introduction

In God's reigning, the physical, social and spiritual are integrated. This is evident in today's gospel of Jesus' encounter with a man suffering from leprosy. Lepers were marginalised, feared and shunned by society as sinners. Yet in a show of indignation mixed with anger at the treated of an outcast, Jesus dares to touch the leper. He assumes the prerogative of the priesthood, by declaring the leper clean.

first reading: Leviticus 13 : 1 – 2, 45 – 46² [Leprosy and laws covering contagious skin diseases]

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying:(1) When a person has on the skin of their body a swelling or an eruption or a spot and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of their body, they shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests.(2) . . . , The person is leprous; unclean. The priest shall pronounce them unclean; the disease is on their head.(44) The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of their head be dishevelled; and they shall cover their upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean."(45) They shall remain unclean as long as they have the disease; they are unclean. They shall live alone; their dwelling shall be outside the camp.(46)

The chapter describes the varieties and symptoms of Leprosy: For many centuries the only known remedy for Leprosy was to ban the leper from all social contact with the healthy. For the Israelites a religious ban was added to strengthen the social ban. The disease came to be looked on as the ultimate punishment for sin. Leprosy inspired fear, even terror, as happens today with the leprosy of our time; the AIDS virus. Lepers were considered 'sinners' and there are parallels here with our attitude to AIDs sufferers. Sufferers face the additional pain of being treated as outcasts by society.³

Today's passages come from the opening and closing section of the chapter that deals with leprosy. The skin diseases were not precisely what modern medicine classifies as Hansen's disease.⁴ The priestly scholars were dealing with many kinds of skin diseases, some of which were temporary. But these diseases

1 Front Cover image: – [Christ cleansing a leper](#) by Jean-Marie Melchior Doze (1864).

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 *The Book of Leviticus* in its final form is the work of the Priestly School after the Babylonian exile.

4 *Leviticus* deals with scaly or fungal infections (Hebrew *šāra'at*). *Sāra'at* refers to not just one but several chronic and enduring skin diseases in human beings. The disease known as *leprosy* (Hansen's disease) is probably not included among the conditions described in the chapter. *Sāra'at* refers to fungal growths in fabrics and on the walls of houses. The reason why these conditions, and not other diseases, were considered unclean may be that they were quite visible, associated with death (cf. *Nm.*12:9–12) and traditionally connected with punishment by God (cf. *Lv.*14:34; *Dt.*28:27, 35; 2 *Sam.*3:29; 2 *Kgs.*5:26–27; 2 *Chr.*26:16–21).

were considered serious enough; not merely because of their contagious character, whether assumed or real, but because they were thought to make the sufferer spiritually *'unclean'*. In other words the various skin diseases made the sufferers unfit to participate in community worship.

Rules were made to quarantine sufferers, who had to report to the priesthood. A priest would diagnose the disease, not as a physician might, but as a minister of *the Torah*, or *Law of Moses*. Then a decision was made about the length of the quarantine period. A return visit was required to check the sufferer's condition. That's the required visit referred to by Jesus, after his healing in today's gospel. It is about the need for the sufferer's recovery to be checked as a safeguard for their acceptability to participate in community worship.

response: Psalm 32 : 1 – 2, 5, 11

[the joy of forgiveness]

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.(1)
Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.(2) . . .
Then I acknowledged my sin to You,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and You forgave the guilt of my sin.(5) . . .
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice,
O righteous, and shout for joy,
all you upright in heart.(11)*

Genuine forgiveness permits freedom to get on with living. No continuing guilt lingers for the forgiven ones. While the life of the restored ones is not the same as it would have been if no transgressions had occurred, but given the situation – God's forgiveness is the real gift. The speaker shares from experience (cf. vv.3-4) and that leads to the conclusion with which the psalm starts. Sin is real. It's not guilt feelings but the honest recognition that sin blocks life with God. That blockage can go on unnoticed, for we have deep capacity for self-deception. The blockage works on the sin's bearer. There's there a profound and uncomplicated understanding of psychosomatic realities. The body pays for covenantal disturbances. There is weight-loss and discomfort, restlessness, and weakness. Then the speaker describes the incredible release (v.5) that comes with acknowledging guilt to God and that is all that is needed.

The Psalm is an individual expressing thanksgiving. It is one of the seven Penitential Psalms. At one time the psalmist was stubborn and closed, a victim of sin's power (cf. vv.3-4) and then became open to the forgiving God (vv.5-7). Sin here, as often in the Bible, is not only the personal act of rebellion against God,

but also the consequences of that act; frustration and a waning of vitality. Having been rescued, the speaker can teach others the joys of justice and the folly of sin.⁵

second reading: 1 Corinthians 10 : 31 – 11 : 1

[do all to the glory of God]

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.(31) Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God,(32) just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved.(33) . . . Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.(11:1)

Only a testimony of love and generosity can reach out to those who consider themselves far from Christ (v.32). According to Paul, a Christian disciple must follow the example, *he (Paul)* has set (v.33). He didn't seek his own advantage when he preached about *the reigning of God*. He was merely imitating the practice of Jesus.⁶ Paul is talking about the freedom that the gospel of Christ gives a disciple. Christ's gospel demands an unusually flexible approach to the task of *extending the good news*.⁷ But this incredible freedom must not be mistaken as license. Paul had earlier reminded his listeners that the Israelite's privileged position before God, didn't protect them from divine disfavour for liberties taken in discharging their covenant responsibilities.⁸ Nor can baptism and holy Eucharist be thought of as rites that guarantee a disciple immunity from judgement in the new dispensation.

The followers of Christ must exercise self-control when they mix with pagans. Paul uses the concept of playing in the games as a metaphor. Competition in games is secondary. His stress is on gaining the prize, the imperishable wreath of the salvation in Christ, which is unlike the prize given to winners of sporting contests. It is the fulfillment of divine promises. The unquestionable value of the prize makes the discipline and effort worthwhile. The prize gives purpose to the training. The sportsperson trains with a goal in view. Discipline and self-control are not ends in themselves. If they were, then the Christian experience would quickly become burdensome. Purposeless training has no virtue. In pursuit of the gospel and in the sharing of its blessings,⁹ discipline and self-control take their proper place. They have their meaning and purpose in the larger perspective of God's purposes for the present and the future.¹⁰

5 Ps.32:8-11.

6 1 Co.11:1

7 1 Co. 9:19-23

8 1 Co.10:1-5

9 1 Co. 9:23

10 The general rule of mutually responsible use of the disciples' freedom is enjoined first negatively (v.32), then positively, as exemplified in Paul (v.33). Finally, it is grounded in Christ, the pattern for Paul's behaviour and theirs (v.11:1; cf. Rm.15:1-3)

gospel reading: Mark 1 : 40 – 45

[the cleansing of a leper]

A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean."(40) Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!"(41) Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.(42) After sternly warning him he sent him away at once,(43) saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."(44) But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.(45)

Jesus touches a leper and declares that he's clean. He dares to challenge the whole system of purity which the Israelite priests control. The leper who approaches Jesus for this declaration of cleanliness, seems to be aware that in approaching a non-priest with his request, he's violating the purity system. He gives Jesus the right of refusing what he asks; it's as if he is saying, "You could declare me clean – if only you dare" (v.40). Jesus dares but Mark tells us he is, 'angered'.¹¹ Jesus acts without fear of either contracting the disease or being contaminated by the associated 'impurity'. He dares to touch a leper. This indignant move makes sense if the man had already been to the priests and they, for reasons of their own, had rejected his earlier petition. The challenge is contained in the repetition of 'cleansing' as meaning 'to declare clean' in the sense of the principles in *Leviticus*. In responding to the leper's request, Jesus appears to be defying *the Torah of Moses* and assuming a priestly prerogative. Mark emphasises Jesus' 'touching the leper'.¹² After declaring the leprosy sufferer's wholeness, Jesus, 'snorting with indignation',¹³ charges the man to front up to the priests.

The task of the leper, whom Jesus had declared clean, isn't to publicise the miraculous. It's to help Jesus confront an ideological system that was based on the symbolic ordering of purity and impurity, which the priesthood controlled. So Jesus instructs the healed man to make the offering for the purpose of, "witnessing against them". This phrase seems to imply condemnation of the whole

11 [v.41] 'Moved with pity' = *orgistheis* in Greek is a stronger word more like 'angered', than the NRSV's translation of Jesus' 'pitying' the man. The essence of the regulations regarding leprosy (see today's first reading) was that the disease is communicable and that a priest must preside over the ritual cleansing. Both principles are challenged by Jesus' actions.

12 According to the Israelite symbolic order, Jesus should have contracted the contagion. Instead, Mark reports the leper is declared 'clean'. Through Jesus' symbolic action, the power of the Israelite purity system is subverted and potentially dismantled.

13 [v.43] 'sternly' = 'embrimesamenos' or 'snorting with indignation'. Again the NRSV misses the strongly emotive response of Jesus. He sends the man back to front up to the priests. It assumes that the man had already been there before - and for whatever reason, the priests had rejected his earlier petition.

Israelite purity system. When used elsewhere in Mark, the phrase describes giving evidence before a hostile audience.¹⁴

Jesus' anger is directed against the purity system. Lepers are victims of this system. The system subjected sufferers to a double oppression. Not only are they made second-class citizens in Israel, but they must also make special payments. Mark at the beginning of his gospel had cited *the oracle of Malachi*,¹⁵ which promises that God will 'cleanse' *the sons of Levi*, until they, 'bring their offerings in true justice'.¹⁶ The oracle further promises that God will appear as 'a witness' against those who use religion to oppress the poor and marginal.¹⁷ In this meeting the cleansing and judgement promised in *the oracle* is realised against the priestly establishment of Jesus' time. But Jesus' strategy doesn't work. The man aborts Jesus' mission by going public and Jesus is forced to go into hiding (v.45). Now he is a marked man – He is the one declared, 'unclean', in the city, because he touched a leper. This symbolic action of declaring clean, sets the tone for the rest of Jesus' public ministry, where the liberating action of establishing God's new reigning, provokes conflict.

for sharing:¹⁸

- *Leprosy and the laws covering contagious skin diseases. Comment on Leviticus 13 : 1 – 2, 45 – 46*
- *Do all for the glory of God. Comment on 1 Corinthians 10 : 31 – 11 : 1*
- *The feeding of the four thousand. Comment on Mark 8 : 1 – 10*

14 Mk.6:11 & Mk.13:9

15 see Mk.1:2

16 Mal.3:3 & Is.40:3

17 Mal.3:5

18 Lectio Divina – is a Latin term for 'reading with God'. It had its origin in monastic life, but anyone can use it. *Lectio divina* is a way of praying using the Scriptures. If practised consistently, it gently leads us into a deeper relationship with Christ as we open ourselves to him. The practice requires a quiet space, a short passage of Scripture and a willingness to give time to the project.

There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This booklet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'. (Mt.18:20).....

prayer:¹⁹

*We come before You, O God,
confident in Christ's victory
over sickness and death.
Heal us again from sin, which divides us,
and from prejudice, which isolates us.
Bring us to wholeness of life
through the pardon You grant Your people.
We ask this through Jesus Christ. Amen.*

review:²⁰

Jesus' response the leper's request is to tell him that he chooses to make him clean. Jesus does not want people to be outcasts. By declaring him clean he heals the physical body and reincorporates the man into society. By touching the leper Jesus has violated the Law, but his gesture corresponds to something much more profound – love for the despised ones of society.

On the other hand, Jesus' indignant response may have taken him further than what he had anticipated; it is too early for Jesus' radical and questioning message to be known. Jesus tells the former leper to show himself to the priest; the condition to be readmitted to society, and not to tell how it happened. However, the man can't keep quiet and creates immediate difficulties for Jesus' mission. But God's reigning has been opened up for the outcasts of society.

Our refusal to open our hearts to others; to stretch out our hands to the disenfranchised, still scandalises those who do not belong to the church (Jews and Greeks in Paul's day). Only a testimony of love and generosity, can reach out to those who consider themselves far from Christ. We follow the example of Paul, who doesn't seek his own advantage in what he does, because he is imitating his Master, the Christ.

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19 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

20 the review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, that provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.