

6th Sunday in O.T. 2021

Over the last number of months, we have heard constant refrains such as, “Control the virus – stop the spread”, or “Wash hands, cover face, make space”. We have come to realise how infectious Covid-19 is, and to know how best to protect ourselves and others. We are aware too how those who unfortunately catch the virus must endure isolation for the sake of the community.

Leprosy was a greatly feared affliction in the ancient world – the first reading of this Sunday’s Mass, gives us a glimpse of how lepers were treated. Lacking any understanding of the biology of the disease, the people of the ancient world believed it to be the outward manifestation of an inner corruption capable of “polluting” and “defiling” the whole community. The communal fear and loathing, generated by leprosy, resulted in the sufferers being totally isolated from both family and society. Cut off socially, and emotionally from all human contact, they lived, as outcasts, a desperate and miserable existence in desolate places, enduring what only can be described as “a living death”.

They were not only isolated from their fellow human beings but were also shut out from the comfort of religion. Leprosy was regarded as the gravest form of divine punishment for sin– it was thought that God had turned his face from the leper! This view was so deeply rooted in that early culture that the biblical authors thought of leprosy as the visible sign of sin. Both leprosy and sin separated people from one another. Sin, like leprosy, was a source of corruption and a cause of division in the community.

Today’s Gospel passage tells of a leper trapped in that terrible isolation of a “living death”, who in desperation, cried out to Jesus, “*If you want to you can cure me*”. Jesus responded to his cry, and stretched out his hand to him and said, “*Of course I want to!*” On the surface this looks like a simple miracle story – Jesus healed the leper – but there is a deeper meaning which touched not only the life of the leper, but touches the life of each of us. This is a story of restoration - Jesus, with outstretched hand, restored the leper to the community as a “child of

God”. Never indifferent to the human situation, Jesus broke through the leper’s isolation, who then discovered that there was a place in the heart of Jesus for him, just as there is for each one of us. In Jesus, the leper discovered that God had not turned his face away from him.

Sin, like leprosy, is never an entirely personal matter. Whether or not a person's sin is public knowledge, the sinner is in some way “separated” from the community of the Church. Even the most secret sin, the most secret act of selfishness, has its influence on the community and the world - for example, secretly viewing certain material on the internet, in the belief that it harms no one. All sin, to some degree, devalues love, and minimises goodness.

Each time we gather to celebrate Mass, and please God we will soon be able to do so again, we immediately acknowledge an inescapable truth – before God, and before one another, we are sinners! We are touched deep in our souls by spiritual leprosy! We acknowledge too what sin does to us as individuals – it wounds our spirit, and causes division. Perhaps, even now as we listen, we can recall times when sin isolated us from another, or from others; those occasions that cause us to want to hide our faces. We have all been there at some time or other, haven't we? Mistakes of the past, bad decisions now regretted, complicated situations in the present, weigh heavily on us, and burden us with guilt. We may feel like hiding our faces, but God, in Jesus, never turns his face away from us – this is the Good News! Pope Francis reassures us that, “with a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, (Jesus) makes it possible for us to lift our heads and start anew” (*EG 3*). A simple, but very encouraging little prayer, is. “The love that we have spoilt, O God of Love, renew.”

Wednesday of this week is Ash Wednesday, and the beginning of Lent. Normally, on this day, we receive ashes on the forehead, in the form of the sign of the Cross, together with the exhortation, “Repent, and believe in the Gospel”. However, this Ash Wednesday, because of the risk of Covid-19 infection, we are unable to receive ashes. However, it will be possible for each one, during streamed Mass at 9.30am on Ash Wednesday morning, to make a Lenten pledge. We will make this

pledge by signing ourselves on the forehead with the sign of the Cross. The pledge is threefold: to grow in prayer; to grow in gratitude by not taking everything for granted; and to grow in awareness of the plight of so many in the world – this is answering the Lenten challenge to pray, to fast, and to give alms.

We know the division our sin and selfishness causes, but like the leper, we too can pray, *“Lord, if you want to you can cure me”*, confident that the Lord never turns his face away from us! This realisation, more than anything else, has the potential of making this Lent different, life changing, and joyful.

*“God of love,
you give your sons and daughters the fond hope
that, after sin, you leave room for repentance.*

*Give us the joy
of using this time of Lent
to turn to you with all our hearts
as a child turns to a father.” Amen.*