

## Homily: Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021

For years I – and perhaps you – have heard preachers speaking about how lepers had to live apart from others, and pointing out that one of the greatest afflictions they faced was the isolation which came with the disease. I've heard this many times, without really ever imagining what it must have felt like. But over the last eleven months, we've all had some glimpse into this life – a life in which normal interaction, being members of society, has been difficult or even impossible.

Today's first reading, from the book of Leviticus, tells us what should happen if someone may have contracted leprosy. He is to be declared unclean; he must live apart, "outside the camp" – in other words, he must quarantine; he must shield his upper lip – the ancient world equivalent of a face covering; and he must go around with torn clothes and disordered hair, presumably as a sign of the illness. Fortunately this pandemic doesn't oblige us to tear our clothes, but we are perhaps living with our hair a bit more dishevelled than usual, given that all the hairdressers are closed! We've all felt the effects of this disease; we've all experienced some degree of isolation and separation during these months. Imagine being a leper. This would be your life. And not only that: life would like this, without any real hope of it changing, and at the same time you could see, from a distance, others getting on with life as normal, enjoying themselves and interacting freely, while you were cast outside of the society.

With this new experience, perhaps we can appreciate more deeply what Jesus did for this man. And He did it in a striking way. Not just with a word: Jesus, we are told, stretched out His hand and touched the man. Physical contact – something unknown for a leper. We all understand now more deeply what this simple gesture must have meant for the man. Jesus reaching out not only in an act of healing, but also an act of love. In this contact, the man is healed, not just in his body, but surely in his spirit too. And because he is healed, he is restored to the community.

But in fact the man's request to Jesus is not to be *healed*, but to be *cleansed*. Our translation uses the word 'cure', but the original text, the Greek, is very clear: the man asks Jesus to be 'cleansed', and Jesus 'cleanses' him. This is significant because, as a leper, the man would have been ritually unclean, and so unable to participate in the worship of God's people; He asks for this gift, first and foremost: "let me be 'clean', so that I may worship again". And Jesus hears his prayer. The Law says that when someone touches a leper, they too become unclean, but in this case the reverse is true. Jesus does not become unclean when He touches the man; instead, the man receives the 'cleanness', the perfection, of Jesus. Every touch of Christ offers us this gift.

Jesus tells the man not to go out and broadcast the news of his healing, but instead to go and see the priest, who will be able to certify that he is healed, and to make the offering which the Law requires him to make to signify his cleansing. And if we were to return to the Book of Leviticus and read on to the next chapter, it tells us what the offering is. It will sound a little strange to us, but it's worth some reflection. The offering was this: two birds

had to be taken. One would be sacrificed, and the other would be dipped in the blood of the dead bird, then allowed to go free. To our modern ears, it all sounds very odd and unnecessarily gruesome. But there is a symbol here: two birds are taken. One is sacrificed, the other goes free. This man who approached Jesus leaves as a free man. He goes on his way, with all the new-found freedom of a bird in flight; and his life has been saved from a disease which was akin to a death sentence in the ancient world. He finds himself cleansed by His encounter with the Lord; But Jesus is the One who will be sacrificed, so that, by His Blood, we may be cleansed of all sins and impurities, and freed from the sentence of death. He willingly gives His life so that we may be freed and cleansed: so that we may truly live.

There is a further sign of this sacrifice at the end of the Gospel today. So many people have heard about the miracle that Jesus is being swamped, even to the extent that He can no longer go freely into the towns, but has to stay outside, in deserted places. He finds Himself exactly where the leper started. Now the healed man is free to live among others again, but Jesus must live outside the camp. He has taken on the leper's burden; He has taken his place. The shadow of the cross again hangs over the Lord. He will take the place of sinners, giving His life in exchange for ours, offering Himself on the cross, so that we may be freed, healed, cleansed and saved. In a few days' time we will enter into the great season of Lent, these 40 days in which the cross of Jesus will be held firmly before our eyes. Let's pray that we may open ourselves to God, to the cleansing and healing touch of Jesus during this time, and that we may find in that cross, that self-giving, our hope of salvation.

Fr Andrew

