

SIXTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2006/B

As each society has its evil, so does each epoch its endemic. If today AIDS frightens people and scares them about the future of mankind, in ancient times, it was leprosy that was a terrible plague which threw a real threat on the life of the individuals and society. Unlike in nowadays, the situation of leprosy was serious not only because there was no drug for its cure, but also because of the religious mentality of that time.

In fact, lepers were considered impure and looked upon as disgusting. They were expelled from their communities for fear of contamination and were separated from the rest of society. As we heard in the 1st reading, anyone showing the symptoms of the disease was forbidden to set foot in the village and was forced to live in caves and remote areas. The lepers also had to wear special garments so as to be recognized from afar as leper. The Law of Moses consecrated all this. This is why a leper was brought to the priest in order to be identified.

One can say that all these customs had been established as public health precautions to prevent other peoples from being contaminated. But the main reason that justified the expulsion of lepers was that they were considered accursed by God because of their sins. From this perspective, it was considered right that people should shun them since God had already punished them. In other words, Israel was convinced that the community should be made up of perfect men and women.

In our contemporary society today, the scorning and banning of lepers has disappeared. The victims of this disease are not longer considered accursed by God and are not humbled and rejected. But do we not still have some Christians who consider natural calamities and diseases as God's punishment? Do we not have in our Christian communities people who, because of their character, defects or color of skin, are looked upon and rejected as lepers? And yet, Jesus Christ has come to save everybody without distinction or discrimination.

In this context, you understand the importance of today's Gospel as showing us how Jesus deals with the leper, and beyond all that, with all the outcasts and the rejected of society. Unlike the Law of Moses that prescribed the rejection of those having leprosy, Jesus treats the leper with respect and love. When someone loves, he is able to break taboos and proscriptions. Love is stronger than the rules, stronger than the law.

With this act Jesus wanted to make known that nobody is to be sent out of, or excluded from, the new family that he has established. This is the point of today's Gospel. In fact, Jesus does not run away from the impure person. He is not afraid to touch him, because he knows that he cannot be contaminated by his impurity. On the contrary, he will be the one who gives new strengths to the leper; he brings him out of his isolation. Light is stronger than darkness, and whenever we open a

window, it will not be darkness that will come in, but light will stream into the room.

What we learn here is that the Disciples of Christ have to adopt their Master's attitude with respect to the rejected. As a matter of fact, as Christians we must seek an encounter with all those who need our help and are disregarded by society. Jesus teaches us that we must approach them, make them feel the warmth of love, since this is the only way in which these "sick people can be brought back to life".

Why in spite of the prohibition to approach the leper, has Jesus welcomed him and even touched him? It is because he was moved to pity; it is because he felt a deep sorrow. It is this very human sentiment that makes him cross the barriers to meet the leper. If, today, we do not have the same sentiment, if we are not capable of feeling compassion in front of suffering, injustice, misery, the humiliation of a brother or a sister, we will never find the courage to approach one who is physically or morally dangerous, we will never fight for the weak, the outcasts and the rejected of society. Hence, this question I ask: "What do we do to foster these sentiments of love and solidarity in our hearts and communicate them to our children? What action do we take to help those who are tortured or mistreated?"

Another thing we learn from this episode is that only those who experience internal liberation, those who have the joy of tasting a new life in the community, are capable of explaining the wonders done by Jesus to them. This is what the leper has done. While Jesus forbade him to tell anyone what happened to him except the priest, the leper could not hide the grace he has received.

Let me finish by recalling this: by touching the leper and by curing him, Jesus destroys the wall that divides people between the bad and the good, the impure and the pure. He builds up a new humanity and a new world based on the law of love. My friends, in spite of the phenomena of globalization, in spite of the development of the means of communication, with Internet and television, which makes the world, like a village, there is still a lot of exclusion in the world.

To identify such exclusion is to recognize that not only our world is sick, but we too are sick. Only one who recognizes his sickness can cry out: "If you wish make me clean". The leprosy of the heart is more dangerous than that of the skin. Let us ask Christ to heal us. Let us imitate his love without frontier and fight for justice and solidarity.



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