

## **Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2012**

The readings of this Sunday talk about human integration. They try to show us how, where human beings are excluding one another for various reasons, Jesus offers the possibility of unity, the incorporation into society and the restoration of human dignity.

The first reading describes the prescriptions of the Law of Moses with regard to the existence of leprosy in the community. In fact, at that time, when someone had leprosy, he had the obligation to make it known to the priest and the whole of society. He wore particular vestments by which he had to be recognized as sick and lived in quarantine separated from the remaining of society until his healing was proven.

What this text teaches is how in ancient Israel, some diseases were difficult to cope with to the point that people were excluded from the life of the community. It teaches us equally how Israel was both a civil and religious society. For that reason, any illness was seen not only as punishment for a committed to sin, but also its presence or its disappearance had to be attested by the priest. In that perspective, the priest played the role of arbiter and judge in the community.

All that helps us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus heals a leper. First of all, the Gospel says that when the leper begged Jesus, he touched him and made him clean. As the leper was immediately healed, Jesus sent him away with the obligation of not talking to anyone about it, except to the priest, and to offer the prescribed sacrifice as proof of his healing. The leper, on the contrary, could not hide the joy of being healed and went on publicizing the whole matter so that it was difficult for Jesus to enter a town openly.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is about the concept of disease and illness. Unlike in today's world where the occurrence of sickness and illness is linked to the presence of virus and bacteria, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament things were different. In fact, disease and sickness were seen as an outcome of sin and a curse. The understanding, then, was that anyone who was faithful to God in his commitment could not get sick that way. It was even believed that riches and prosperity were a reward from God for holiness of life.

But, how wrong is such a concept! Because, in truth, disease and illness have nothing to do with God's punishment or curse! On the contrary, they are part of the human condition and in that sense, they are unavoidable. Soon or later, we can get sick of any disease according to the constitution of our body and the inherited factors. That is why by healing the leper, Jesus shows that he has come in order to share our human condition and to set us free. He does not look at the leper as a sinner that God has punished, but as someone who was in need.

The second thing we learn is about the importance of compassion. The Gospel says that by seeing the leper, Jesus was moved with pity and healed him. To be moved with pity means to have a deep feeling toward the person in our presence. It means also to identify ourselves with the person in our presence and to put ourselves in his shoes so that his problem becomes our problem and his suffering becomes our suffering. Without this feeling, it would be very difficult to help someone in need. Without feeling

compassion, we will never fight injustice, exclusion and discrimination. That is why indifference is not only wrong, but it is morally dangerous.

The third thing we learn is that inclusion is better than exclusion, tolerance is better than intolerance. In fact, the Law of Moses prescribed to exclude from society anyone who had some type of disease like leprosy. In doing so, it built a wall of the separation between the healthy and the non-healthy, the good and the bad, the sinner and the so-called saints.

Jesus, on the contrary, has come for everybody so that anyone of those who approach him may receive salvation and liberation. That is why he treats the leper with respect and love. He does not run away from him because he is impure or sick of a contagious disease. He is not even afraid of touching him, because he knows that the only way to give him hope again is to heal him.

In that perspective, by healing the leper, Jesus gives him back his human dignity and establishes him in his right of son of God like anybody else. For that reason, we have to understand that a human being remains always a human person whatever might be his physical or mental condition. It is important to respect anyone who is physically or mentally diminished, like the handicapped, the paralyzed and the elderly. We should always remember that we are not only a society of the healthy people, but also of the sick who deserve all our respect and love.

By healing the leper, Jesus wants to teach us inclusion instead of exclusion. Moreover, Jesus wants to let us know that he has come in order to destroy the barriers that separate people and set an example we all have to follow, namely that there is no one that God excludes from his presence because of his physical appearance or the color of his skin. That is why this Gospel is a challenge to each one of us who easily exclude people from our circle of life for undeclared reasons.

The last thing we learn from the Gospel is that internal liberation is more important than physical healing. In fact, the truth of our life shows clearly that the leprosy of the heart is more devastating than that of the skin. That is why the physical cleansing of the leper symbolizes the interior healing that reconciles someone with God. In that perspective, we have to understand that we all need to reconcile with our brothers and sisters and with God through the Sacrament of confession, because we are spiritually sick.

That is the only way we can give glory to God, when what we do is done in an irreproachable way and with the best of our intentions. Let us pray, then, that the Lord may help us to reconcile with him and with one another. May he touch our hearts so that we come to work for the integration of the marginalized and the excluded of society. May God bless you all!

**Leviticus 13: 1-2, 44-46; 1 Corinthians 10: 31-11:1; Mark 1: 40-45**



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