



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## **6th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B**

### ***Jesus touched him***

*Readings: Leviticus 13: 1-2, Ps 31, 1 Corinthians 10: 31-11:1, Mark 1: 40-45*

*'Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him.'*

We read this as if it were the most normal thing in the world for Jesus to do. WRONG. You did not touch lepers. Lepers had their own separate colonies, their separate way of life. They dressed to warn the unwary that disease was approaching. They rang a bell to ensure that you gave them a wide berth. To be a leper was to be an outcast. To touch one was to invite sickness, disintegration and death.

In this post antibiotic age where people largely neglect to wash their hands before preparing or eating food or after going to the lavatory, we find it difficult to get our minds round the concept of such quarantine and isolation. Now however, we have had the reminder of Ebola. How quickly devastating illness can bring mortality to thousands, how inadequately prepared we are for plague.

The fourteenth century saw the devastation of Europe with the Black Death. In six short years between a third and a half of Europe and the east lay dead.

In the seventeenth century the devastation of a fifth of London's population fell from the same cause.

In 1918 more died from Spanish Influenza than human destruction had wrought in self slaughter in the preceding four years.

When I began ministry 36 years ago, one in four people would develop some form of cancer. Last week we were told it would be one in two. Plagues, rapid or slow, are a constant reminder of our fragility and our brief mortality.

They are also, by the text of this Gospel and by the pictures on our TV news screens, a reminder of the sheer loneliness of illness. Whether cast out like the leper or swathed in a hospital bed, illness is a very lonely place. There is no-one else who can go through it for us.

We were born alone and we will die alone, however many are at the bedside. Illness isolates. We could cope with it so much better if we felt well. But it remorselessly eats at our strength and our priorities. Pain is all absorbing and we are fortunate to have a medical culture which has the wherewithal to intervene and make tolerable the unendurable that our ancestors simply had to endure.

In illness we can only imagine the things that we used to do, the society that we used to keep, the plans that we casually made with some presumption of fulfilment. All that is now boiled down to a battle for survival and a frantic effort to keep the channels of communication open and to reach out for the touch that says we are not alone, however lonely or dark it may become.

It is into the isolation of the outcast that Jesus walks when he ignores the leper's cry of warning, the rags of destitution and the decay of the flesh.

It is into the untouchable contagion of mortality that Jesus reaches out and touches the dying man.

It is into the despair of the hopelessness of the incurable that Jesus speaks the words of transformation and life.

The leper approaches Jesus by falling on his knees. He takes an attitude of prayer and supplication, of worship, of acknowledging the authority of Christ.

He says simply, 'If you will....you can make me clean'

He places himself utterly at the disposal of the Divine will. Jesus replies simply that it is His will. 'I will it.'

The leper is cleansed. He is given his life back. He is able to rejoin the community and be part of its worshipping life, its *raison d'être*.

On the spiritual plain it is, of course, the model of our confession, absolution and restoration to the divine communion at the Mass and in eternity. Sin is the illness that makes us very lonely people and alienates us from one another and from God. Reconciliation at the Cross is the on the physical level it is a reminder that, even in extremis, the sacramental presence of Christ reaches out and touches us with His hand of mercy and the knowledge of His compassion and will that we should, in Him,

live forever in the presence of God with the saints who worship around the throne of glory.

So, when the Church ministers to the sick, whether they be healed of this round of infirmity or are preparing to make the final journey home, we bring Christ to the lonely, the isolated, those who perhaps no longer have the strength to pray for themselves. In the Sacraments we bring Christ.

And we ask for their prayers who, in their suffering are especially close to the Cross.

As family and friends, through our willingness to reach out and touch and to walk with the suffering, we are reflecting that Light of the World who will scatter the darkness before the sick – be they called to live a little more here or move onto the place of purification and healing before the final ascent of the Holy Mountain and the Eternal Presence of the love which is our origin and our end.

We are the people who can speak this truth to one another and to sin sick humanity in all its fragile mortality because we, both as followers and ministers of Jesus, understand what is at stake.