



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year B-February 14th 2021

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

For most of us in the free world, post anti-biotics etc., contagion was a thing of the history books. We read of the Black Death, a third of Europe dead, with a detached amazement. We scarcely paid attention to the Curse of the Spanish Lady, which, in the space of two or three years killed more than 50 million in the wake of the First World War – substantially more than the war itself.

Now, sadly, we have a bitter taste of what happens when a pandemic strikes. We are fortunate to have the scientific advances to begin to combat this new and ancient terror but not before it has wasted the lives of many millions worldwide. Why it has been worse in some places than others or for some categories of people than others will be the subject of a long inquest. What we have had to get used to is a set of protocols and behaviours that are utterly alien to our experience and our deepest desires. Who would have imagined a year's isolation for the alone or the vulnerable? Who could have contemplated not seeing family or friends, not touching, washing our deliveries, not singing, wearing masks like bandits, not able to sit in a café, browse in a shop, visit a neighbour, isolate ourselves at the first hint of illness, avoid the doctors, the hospitals and so on?

If nothing else it gives us an insight into the strange world of the man who greets Jesus this morning, the leper.

Leprosy is a chronic, progressive bacterial infection. It primarily affects the nerves of the extremities, the skin, the lining of the nose, and the upper respiratory tract. It affects eyesight and nerves, leading to loss of sense of pain and decay of the flesh. No wonder people did not want to catch it.

The ancient remedy, which is outlined extensively in Leviticus, is examination and then exclusion from society. The leper must live 'outside the camp', sound a warning bell to all who might approach and cry out 'Unclean, unclean'.

The priest had the unenviable task of examining the afflicted and pronouncing diagnosis and, if confirmed, exclusion from society.

It is against this background that the leper, in today's Gospel, breaking all the protocols, flings himself to his knees before Jesus and prays. The man has broken every rule in the good book and, in a moment Jesus will do the same.

'If it is your will, if you want to.....you have the power to heal me'.

The actual word is 'clean me', purify me, make me acceptable again to the community, end this endless social distancing and self-isolation, give me back my life, my place in society.

Mark notes that Jesus is filled with compassion, tenderness, and He does the unthinkable – He reaches out and TOUCHES the Leper. All rules broken.

'I want to. I will it. Be cleansed. Be restored'. And the lost man is found, the dead man raised, the cursed man blessed, the reject received home. It is a miracle but not as much of a miracle as the Holy God receiving sinners and transforming them. The miracle of our redemption is prefigured in the healing, the reconciliation of the leper. We kneel, we plead, we seek healing, we long for inclusion. Christ wills it. He will go to the Cross for it. Christ achieves it in His rising and victory over sin and

death. Christ's tenderness displays the heart of God, reaching out to touch and transform his exiled children. Unclean? No more

Jesus then does something else extraordinary, apart from commanding the man to follow the procedures laid down in Leviticus. He commands him not to speak of it. The word Mark uses is 'severe warning', the actual word is 'snorted' like a horse. 'Listen up pal and listen good...', Jesus says because he knows what the upshot of publicity will be.

And indeed, it is. The healed leper goes and shows himself to the priest, rejoicing at his cure. Everyone will want to know the source of this miracle. How can he not tell them?

From then on Jesus cannot go anywhere without being pursued by huge and expectant crowds, seeking His healing ministry.

Today, in the light of recent and continuing experience, we have some idea of the desperate life of the excluded, those facing it alone, our own shielding, our own alienation from the ones we love, the danger of touch, the impossibility of being with those in distress and in extremis. We are social animals, family creatures and members of community. In adversity we rediscover just how much is lost when we cannot fulfil these roles for one another. In crisis we rediscover how much we need community.

The Leper is cleansed and restored. That is the Good News of the Gospel. Sin, like leprosy, makes us very lonely people.

We, the unclean, kneeling at the feet of Jesus, pray faithfully that, of His willingness and tenderness, we may yet be touched by God and restored to the company of the Saints in light. Alone no more, healed and reconciled, we may take up our place in the society which seemed to be lost to us forever.

Unclean, we kneel in the confessional. Cleansed we return to our community of Faith and hear, not the warning bell of our alienation and distance from God but the Sanctuary Bell, alerting us to the Presence and inviting us to come home.

