

Leprosy – A Homily

Leprosy was often considered by the Israelites to be a punishment for sin. In our tradition it has frequently been used as a symbol for sinfulness. The disease of Leprosy, like sin, begins gradually with a few spots, but as it increasingly debilitates a person, it makes them utterly repugnant to others. It is always fatal in the end, and it's terribly contagious. Think of this poor Leper as symbolizing the state of all of us sinners.

Jesus wants us to be clean, whole, pure, undefiled, perfectly healthy. *"I do will it. Be made clean."* His heart was moved with compassion. Jesus literally had a visceral reaction. We get this word visceral from the Latin word *viscera*, meaning, the inward parts (e.g., the heart, lungs, kidneys, intestines, etc.). As you probably know, the New Testament was originally written in Greek. The word for compassion in Greek is derived from the Greek word for inward parts, just like the Latin word *viscera*. Our own sensibilities can be startled when we unexpectedly see someone disfigured, disabled, or in extreme distress. It's the way you probably felt the first time you saw one of the planes crashing into the Towers. You might have felt a quick lifting, or surging sensation in your abdomen that seems to radiate outward. You had a visceral reaction. This is the way Jesus reacted at the sight of the Leper, and this is the way he reacts when we approach him as spiritual lepers.

Jesus could read souls. He himself preached that uncleanness comes from inside of man. He can see the spiritual state of leprosy that all of us are in to some extent, and he is moved with compassion. He wants us to be clean inside. Heaven is described in the last two chapters of the book of Revelation, and it states there that, *"nothing unclean shall enter it."* If we are not cleansed in this life then we will have to be purged in the next. This is what the Church has called Purgatory.

So, what is the current state of our soul. How dirty are we right now? Lent is drawing closer. Are we simply a bit grubby, or perhaps even grungy or grimy, maybe even a little scummy? Or are we starting to become downright rank and rotten. Hopefully we haven't reached the advanced stages of spiritual leprosy.

Who wouldn't want to be clean? What a word clean is. One thinks of fresh lemons. Wouldn't you like to come clean... squeaky clean... clean as a whistle? All of us could use a good spiritual cleansing. When a priest comes forward to proclaim the Gospel he mutters a prayer to himself, "Almighty God, cleanse my heart and my lips that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel." Then at the altar as his hands are washed by the servers he mutters, "Lord, wash away my iniquity and cleanse me of my sin." Most of us could probably use a spiritual shower. We might just need to soak in the hot soapy water of Christ in meditating on the Gospels, or sitting in front of the tabernacle. When dirt is really encrusted on you usually need some presoaking to come fully clean. We could lather up with the soap of the word of God, and prayerful self-examination, and then have a nice cleansing and clarifying rinse in the sacrament of reconciliation. Notice that God instructs the people of Israel in Leviticus to go to the priest if you have leprosy. Even Christ did not countermand this instruction, but told the Leprous man he had cleansed to go show yourself to the priest. He will declare you either clean or unclean. So it is with the sacrament of penance.

We must try to remain spiritually clean. The cleaner a window is, the more light it will let in. So it is in the spiritual life. The more clean our hearts become, the more we are illumined by the Holy Spirit. The Lord touched the Leprous man. Lent is less than three weeks away. What are the areas of sin in our life that we wish the Lord to touch and cleanse?