

6th Sunday (B)

11th February 2024

‘Outcasts and reaching out’

Lev 13: the stigma of leprosy 1Cor 10: never do anything offensive

Mk 1: 40–45: “ ‘Of course I want to . . . Be cured!’ ”

We’re on the brink of Lent, now: Ash Wednesday is this coming week, so this is the last ‘Sunday of Ordinary Time’ until June, after the Easter season. If it weren’t a Sunday, we’d be keeping 11th February as the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, World Day of Prayer for the Sick. I spoke at length about this last week — based on the Lord’s prolific healing ministry in the Gospel — and encouraged you to get thinking about coming to Lourdes with the Newman House group of helpers when we go in July.

On this 6th Sunday of Ordinary Time we conclude our reading of the diverse and incident-packed 1st chapter of St Mark, which we’ve been hearing from since the end of the Christmas season at the beginning of January. It’s a very short passage that we hear today, another healing miracle, but not simply the healing of a man’s diseased skin. This encounter represents much more than that, marvellous though his physical healing was for the leper himself. Lepers, as we heard in the first reading, were

obliged by the Law of Moses to live outside the village, away from the community, owing to the contagiousness of the leprosy. This made the leper an outcast, a *persona non grata*. The point of Jesus’s encounter with this leper in Mk 1 — and it’s not the only one recorded in the Gospels — is that He *goes up to the man*, and He *touches* him, rather than avoiding him. The man has been shunned by the community, but he is not shunned by Jesus. Our Lord gives an example of great openness to the ‘outsider.’ So, whilst it’s a healing of the man’s leprosy, it’s more significantly an emotional (and spiritual) healing for him, in that he can return to civilized life; he is welcomed back into his family and friendship group, and can return to the synagogue worship. Now, admittedly, in Jesus’s day, with limited medical knowledge, one can understand the actions of a community to distance itself from the ravages of a contagious disease, to separate themselves off from those with the illness. Yet Jesus overcame this distancing, and reached out to the man himself, not treating him as ‘subhuman.’

We can think of some amazing saints who followed this example bravely: **St Aloysius Gonzaga**, the Jesuit who worked in the plague hospitals of 16th-c. Rome; **St Damien**, the Belgian missionary who worked in the Hawaiian Islands in the 19th c. and ministered at the leper colony on Molokai. These died of the very same diseases as the people whom they served, but they were not afraid to do that, in order to reach out and save spiritually the souls to whom they felt called. There's also the extraordinary 20th-c. English convert, **John Bradburne**, a Third-Order Franciscan and the most prolific poet in the English language of all time: he served for 10 yrs as the warden of a remote leper colony in Zimbabwe, where he served daily the practical needs of the lepers in the colony. Despite his being warned of acute danger as the civil war advanced on the region where he lived, yet he faithfully stayed caring for the lepers until the very end, when in 1979 he was abducted by guerrillas and summarily shot. His cause for sainthood is open and he is referred to as 'Servant of God,' the first rung on the ladder of official canonization.

The message we receive, surely, then, from this Gospel passage today is to reach out without fear to those isolated — as did St Aloysius, St Damien, and John Bradburne. We need to ask: is Our Lord calling us to minister in some way, great or small, to someone who has become separated from family, or has become lonely at university, or disconnected through old age or bereavement? Alternatively, is there anyone cut off from us through argument or long-running tension? Isn't it time to follow Our Lord's lead, and reach out across that awkward divide, heal and mend that relationship? In some cases we need to be brave. When Pope Benedict canonized St Damien of Molokai, he said this:

"Not without fear and loathing, Father Damien made the choice to go on the island of Molokai in the service of lepers who were there, abandoned by all. So he exposed himself to the disease of which they suffered. With them he felt at home. The servant of the Word became a suffering servant, leper with the lepers, during the last four years of his life."

We, too, when we are reaching out across emotional divides, extending a hand of friendship to those otherwise

cut off from the community for whatever reason, have to have the courage of Christ. Just as to the leper who asked Him, “If You want to, You can cure me,” Jesus said, “Of course I want to,” so we also need to have that certainty that comes from following Jesus: “of course I want to” ... Of course I want to reach across that barrier and bring them back into community with me and with others. Of course I want to ... even if it’s hard. Of course I want to ... but I need God’s grace.

Maybe we should each take a moment now to think. Is there someone I should be reaching out to in kindness, that I have neglected? Is there someone — anyone — that I am in conflict with, or misunderstanding, or tension, or simply lacked the time to contact? How am I going to deal with that? How am I going to take it forward, in a Christ-like way, reaching out in faith and courage, without mistrust or lack of charity? Make it a prayer now ... Make it your prayer of this Holy Mass, that Our Lord will show you how to do that; and will give you the love to act on it.

St Aloysius Gonzaga, ... St Damien of Molokai, ...

John Bradburne: help us to imitate the Lord Jesus in actually reaching out to those we have isolated; and in bringing healing to those otherwise neglected.

A final point. Had we been continuing Ordinary Time into ensuing Sundays, we’d have heard next week the start of Mk ch. 2 — the episode of the paralytic man being lowered by his friends through the roof — which moves Our Lord’s ministry quite quickly into a higher gear: the *forgiveness of sins*, the healing of the *soul* and not just that of the body. We’ve heard today about Jesus’s reaching out to touch the leper, and bring him healing and recognition. But the Holy One of God readily associated Himself with all sorts of other outcasts too: the poor, the sinners, the foreigners, the collaborators, the tax-collectors. In no way did He ever justify or excuse any wrong-doing or sin by any of them; but He distinguished between the sin and the sinner. *If* there was sin, then He condemned it, and He forgave it; but in the sinner or the outcast, He saw a human being, an immortal soul, a person who should rightly be, and be treated as, a son or daughter of God.

“Hate the sin; love the sinner.” It was St Augustine who, in one of his many works, coined that catchy maxim of our Christian approach: “Hate the sin, but love the sinner.” Everyone makes mistakes; but everyone is still worthy of love in God’s sight, and it is often that experience of love that can help turn someone’s life around, away from sin and isolation, and back towards an experience of forgiveness and faith. What we must *not* do is to *hate the sinner* and make him an outcast: instead, we love the sinner, and urge him or her to do what is right: we do that by prayer and encouragement and example, and always with the image of Jesus reaching out and touching the leper. It is the Christian love which we extend to those in sinful situations which can help heal them. Not easy, especially if the sin strikes at the heart of family or friendship, bringing feelings of hurt and betrayal, disbelief that they could go so against the laws of God, and disappointment if they don’t feel any need to put their lives at rights again with God. But they might one day ask us, “If you want to, you can help heal me.” We have to be

ready to reply with Jesus, “Of course I want to.”

Of course, in the mix, here, is the perpetual caveat that each of us, too, is a sinner, in need of Jesus’s reaching out to heal and forgive. As we reach out to help heal and forgive, we do so from a position of humility. Jesus did so as the sinless Son of God; we must do, too, but conscious of, and not oblivious to, our own sinfulness, which demands a strict observance of avoiding any hypocrisy.

Lent, which we’re about to begin, is a season that will afford us ample time to examine our lives and search our souls: for the need to be forgiven, and the need to forgive; for the need to extend that personal appeal to Jesus, “If you wish, you can heal me” and the need to respond to that appeal from others, “If you wish, you can help heal me in Jesus’s name.”

Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us in this endeavour.

St Aloysius Gonzaga, pray for us.

St Damien of Molokai, pray for us.

John Bradburne, pray for us.