

SFX 6B 2023

We are still in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, the first Gospel to be set down. So imagine hearing the Gospel for the first time. Jesus has come up through the waters of baptism and begins to proclaim the kingdom. Disciples have already been drawn to him, the demons have been agitated and unsettled by his presence. And now as he proclaims the Kingdom by word and deed. So we are watching closely what he does, and listening carefully to what he says, to understand this mysterious man, as he moves among his own people in Galilee.

A leper comes to Jesus, and gets down on his knees. "*If you want to,*" he said "*you can cure me.*" "*Of course I want to,*" says Jesus. Do we sometimes doubt God's good intention towards us? Remember those words when we doubt God's goodness: "*Of course I want to.*" Jesus' whole mission is to heal the wounds of humanity and comfort the broken-hearted.

"*Feeling sorry for him.*" It is easy to gloss over the profound emotions of Jesus, and it seems that very early on a scribe did just that. Our text says Jesus was *feeling sorry* for him, but that is a weak translation. "He was gutted, sick to his stomach." Why?

First, I am sure at his **physical suffering**. But there is a **double suffering** with leprosy. Society had made this man a **pariah, a social outcast**. Leprosy was described by ancient writers as a kind of **living death**. Society had buried this man long before he was dead. This man had been pushed to the margins, made an outcast: stigmatized, scorned and shunned. We saw with covid – the double suffering. The disease in itself, and the isolation forced upon people. Suffers left to die in isolation, without the support, comfort and touch of friends and family. It was a bitter time.

So what did Jesus do in response? He broke all the old rules laid down by Moses and Aaron. He "*stretched out his hand and touched him.*" A simple gesture: but a profound revelation. He draws the man out of his isolation. We can imagine the horror of the bystanders at this outrageous expression of love and sympathy.

What we have in this story is the Gospel itself in miniature, played out in three movements.

The **first movement**, Christ reaching out to the leper is a sign of that great reaching-out of the Father to humanity through the Son. God so loved the world that he took on our flesh, so that a world cut off from God becomes one with God. This is Christ's great work of atonement: '*at-one-ment*' bringing the world back into harmony with its Creator God.

But it is more than a reaching out, because the **second movement** is that in touching the leper **Jesus himself becomes unclean** according to the codes of his day. Jesus becomes unclean for the sake of the leper, or as St Paul puts it, **became sin** to free us from sin, and bind up humanity's wounds.

But there is a **third movement** – notice what happens to Jesus and the leper at the end of the story. They seem to swap places. The leper is freed from his isolation and goes about the crowds freely. But the opposite happens to Jesus. **He has to hide**, he becomes isolated, he is no longer free. He becomes an outcast and already we are pointed towards the lonely place outside the walls of Jerusalem where abandoned, Jesus will fulfill his destiny, pinned down, nailed to the cross.

He would die with a passionate cry that **everyone belongs and everyone is forgiven and everyone is loved**. "*When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.*" Do we doubt it? That is the Gospel.

Watching the leper disappear from the scene, *telling the story everywhere* he becomes, in a way, Mark's first evangelist. He is the first of a long line of the marginalised and outcast that Jesus will touch through his ministry: lepers, tax-collectors, women, those tainted by adultery, prostitutes, Gentiles, Samaritans, the physically deformed, the mentally disturbed. These people must not be excluded by religious law or social convention: they must be loved. The prejudices of every age must be fought.

Who are the lepers of our society, of our day? The ones we think of as unclean. Who feels like an outcast in the church? Who has been pushed to the margins. Who is not yet at the table? Who is sitting right in front of us begging to be seen.

Jesus touches the leper, heals him, brings him from **isolation into communion**. That is the whole mission of Christ. No-one is to live outside the camp. The new camp is a camp for all. Again and again Jesus teaches us not to delineate the world between outsiders and insiders.

Have you ever cut anybody off? Turned your back on someone? Turned up the fridge? Not returned the call? Walked away? Left them in their own isolation? Perhaps we all have. And perhaps we have experienced it. **But it is not the way**. The rules of the old camp are not the rules of the new Kingdom.

Faced with our fears we can go two ways. We can fight, each man and woman for himself, turn inwards to our own small circles and raise the drawbridge. Or we relearn what society is to be about, we can shape our future with a new set of priorities, kingdom values of equality, justice and fairness.

We see a **sign** of this in the **Eucharist**, where the *many grains of wheat* form **one loaf**, *many grapes crushed* form the **one cup**. We lift them up now as a sign of the new Kingdom, and pray that our prejudices dissolve and the boundaries between us fall away.