

GOSPEL

Mark 1:40–45

A leper came to Jesus and pleaded on his knees: ‘If you want to’ he said ‘you can cure me.’ Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. ‘Of course I want to!’ he said. ‘Be cured!’ And the leprosy left him at once and he was cured. Jesus immediately sent him away and sternly ordered him, ‘Mind you say nothing to anyone, but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your healing prescribed by Moses as evidence of your recovery.’ The man went away, but then started talking about it freely and telling the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to stay outside in places where nobody lived. Even so, people from all around would come to him.

A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

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TIIn these Sundays, Mark the Evangelist speaks to us about Jesus’ actions against every type of evil, for the benefit of those suffering in body and spirit: the possessed, the sick, sinners.... Jesus presents Himself as the One who fights and conquers evil wherever He encounters it. In today’s Gospel (cf. Mk 1:40-45) this struggle of His confronts an emblematic case, because the sick man is a leper. Leprosy is a contagious and pitiless disease, which disfigures the person, and it was a symbol of impurity: a leper had to stay outside of inhabited centres and make his presence known to passersby. He was marginalized by the civil and religious community. He was like a deadman walking.

The episode of the healing of the leper takes place in three brief phases: the sick man’s supplication, Jesus’ response, the result of the miraculous healing. The leper beseeches Jesus, “kneeling”, and says to Him: “If you will, you can make me clean” (v. 40). Jesus responds to this humble and trusting prayer because his soul is moved to deep pity: compassion. “Compassion” is a most profound word: compassion means “to suffer-with-another”. Jesus’ heart manifests God’s paternal compassion for that man, moving close to him and touching him. And this detail is very important. Jesus “stretched out his hand and touched

him.... And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean” (vv. 41-42). God’s mercy overcomes every barrier and Jesus’ hand touches the leper. He does not stand at a safe distance and does not act by delegating, but places Himself in direct contact with our contagion and in precisely this way our ills become the motive for contact: He, Jesus, takes from us our diseased humanity and we take from Him his sound and healing humanity. This happens each time we receive a Sacrament with faith: the Lord Jesus “touches” us and grants us his grace. In this case we think especially of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which heals us from the leprosy of sin.

Once again the Gospel shows us what God does in the face of our ills: God does not come to “give a lesson” on pain; neither does He come to eliminate suffering and death from the world; but rather, He comes to take upon Himself the burden of our human condition and carries it to the end, to free us in a radical and definitive way. This is how Christ fights the world’s maladies and suffering: by taking them upon Himself and conquering them with the power of God’s mercy.

The Gospel of the healing of the leper tells us today that, if we want to be true disciples of Jesus, we are called to become, united to Him, instruments of his merciful love, overcoming every kind of marginalization. In order to be “imitators of Christ” (cf. 1 Cor 11:1) in the face of a poor or sick person, we must not be afraid to look him in the eye and to draw near with tenderness and compassion, and to touch him and embrace him. I have often asked this of people who help others, to do so looking them in the eye, not to be afraid to touch them; that this gesture of help may also be a gesture of communication: we too need to be welcomed by them. A gesture of tenderness, a gesture of compassion.... Let us ask you: when you help others, do you look them in the eye? Do you embrace them without being afraid to touch them? Do you embrace them with tenderness? Think about this: how do you help? From a distance or with tenderness, with closeness? If evil is contagious, so is goodness. Therefore, there needs to be ever more abundant goodness in us. Let us be infected by goodness and let us spread goodness!

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or Reflection/ Homily?



Head: Pope Francis tells us, "[Jesus] takes from us our diseased humanity and we take from Him his sound and healing humanity." What does this mean to you?



Heart: Have you experienced the touch of Jesus in the Sacraments? What happened?



Hands: How might we show "compassion" and be "imitators of Christ" more deeply in our lives? How can we become more open to the "touch" of Jesus?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another:

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Offer prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps praying the 'Glory Be'.