

## **Sunday 6b**

ONE Conference

14 February 2015

Dear brother priests and dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

### ***Introduction***

Before addressing the Gospel proclaimed for today, I wish to express how good it is to be here with such a large gathering of the People of God from all over the Archdiocese. I treasure your diversity of charisms, gifts and ministries. It is really a magnificent manifestation of the rich catholicity and vigour of our local Church. But even more, I see a great hope for our common mission of bringing the joy of the Gospel to this corner of the Vineyard. We are united in love, a personal love, of the Lord and are resolved to share in his mission.

I thank all those who laboured to make this ONE Conference possible and fruitful: the organizers, the participants and the speakers who have challenged us. Thank you, one and all.

### ***Gospel Setting***

Now to the Gospel passage from the first chapter of St. Mark's Gospel.

Few afflictions at the time of Jesus – as is also the case today – were more hideous and terrifying than that of leprosy – a bacterial infection which causes the skin to break out in oozing sores, leading to disfigurement and loss of limbs. In ancient times, leprosy was

incurable and its diagnosis was nearly always a life sentence. Added to the physical suffering, was the spiritual suffering caused by ostracism and a kind of forced solitary confinement. Lepers were excluded from both the social and religious community.

The First Reading records the source of this practice in the Mosaic Law: “And anyone who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes, and let the hair of their head be dishevelled and shall cover their upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ That person shall remain unclean as long as the disease persists; and being unclean such a one shall live alone with their dwelling outside the camp” (Lev 13:45-46). Probably the worst of the lepers’ plight was their ritual uncleanness, their being barred from entering the temple, God’s holy dwelling place.

Nobody wanted to touch a leper. The leper in the Gospel must have lived without the touch of another human being for a long time.

### *The Leper’s “Ask”*

Despite his social isolation, a leper approaches Jesus and utters words full of both courage and faith: “If you choose, you can make me clean” (Mk 1:40). This was a bold move, since he violated the strictures of the Law and risked being publicly ridiculed and reviled. He had to believe in Jesus’ power in order to say such a thing. It was a confession of faith.

This leper is an excellent teacher of the right way to make

petitions. He knelt down, a sign for him – as for us – of both supplication and reverence. And he did not doubt the Lord’s power, but neither did he take it for granted, for he knew the depths of his own sinfulness. Moreover, he did not ask to be healed but to made clean. What he wanted most of all, because it was the deepest pain of all, was his freedom to be able to share once again in the worship of his people.

The leper displays two fundamental attitudes of prayer. Prayer is both needy and confident. “When we ask for something, our prayer is needy: I need this, hear me Lord!” And, “when it is true [prayer], it is also confident: listen to me, I believe you can do it, for you have promised it!”<sup>1</sup>

### ***“Moved with Pity”: Jesus’ Compassion***

At the plight of the petitioning leper Jesus is “moved with pity” though a better translation is probably “moved by compassion.” Pity, if not understood correctly, can be merely sentimental – and too often focuses on the feelings of the observer rather than the person in need. Compassion, on the hand, entails identifying with someone who is suffering and entering that person’s world with tenderness and care, sharing in their lot. “It means to *suffer with*, in other words to empathize with the suffering of another, to the point of taking it upon

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Morning Meditation (6 December 2013).

oneself. Jesus is like this: he suffers together with us, he suffers with us, he suffers for us.”<sup>2</sup>

Compassion builds bridges between people and unites them. It moves us from being observers who “feel bad” to participants in suffering.

The difference can be explained, perhaps, in this way. We might be “moved to pity” when we encounter those who are homeless. Indeed, we may even be willing to support them – but with a condition, whether uttered or not: “as long as they do not set up in my backyard.” NIMBYism. We pity them, yes; but I wonder if we have true compassion.

### ***Jesus’ Healing Touch***

Jesus was “moved by pity or compassion,” but then he immediately showed his desire to share in the leper’s pain: “Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him” (Mk 1:41). He “is the hand of God stretched out to humanity, to rescue it from the quicksands of illness and death so that it can stand on the firm rock of divine love (cf. Ps 39:2-3).”<sup>3</sup>

For me, the centre of Mark’s account is the beautiful gesture of

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<sup>2</sup> Francis, Angelus (3 August 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, Angelus (12 February 2006).

Jesus stretching out his hand, bridging the gap between the holy and the unclean, and touching the man. It reminds me of the Sistine Chapel ceiling where Michelangelo's God the Father has his hand stretched out to Adam, not quite touching it mind you, but ready to give life.

That gesture and his words, "I do choose, be made clean!" (Mk 1:41) contain the whole history of salvation. They embody God's will to heal each of us, to purify us from whatever disfigures God's image in us.

Jesus took upon himself our infirmities, he made himself "a leper" so that we might be cleansed.<sup>4</sup>

It is also possible to see leprosy as a symbol of sin, which is the true impurity of heart that can distance us from God. It is not the physical disease of leprosy that separates us from God but sin, spiritual and moral evil. The sins that we commit distance us from God and, if we do not humbly confess them, trusting in divine mercy, they will finally bring about the death of the soul.

In his Passion, Jesus becomes like a leper, made impure by our sins, carrying our guilt. He does all this out of love, so that we might be reconciled and forgiven, restored to the wholeness of salvation. In the Sacrament of Penance, the Crucified and Risen Christ purifies us

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (12 February 2012)

through his ministers with his infinite mercy, restores us to communion with the heavenly Father and with our brothers and makes us a gift of his love, his joy and his peace.

### ***Touching the Leper's Wounds Today***

Admittedly, most of us will never come in contact with a leper. So, how can I find him today? Where do I treat the wounds of my brothers and sisters? Pope Francis tells us the answer when he says:

I find them in doing works of mercy, in giving to the body – to the body and to the soul, but I stress the body – of your injured brethren, for they are hungry, thirsty, naked, humiliated, slaves, in prison, in hospital. These are the wounds of Jesus in our day.<sup>5</sup>

Mere philanthropic actions do not suffice, the Pope added. We must touch the wounds of Jesus, caress them. We must heal the wounds of Jesus with tenderness. Like St. Francis, we must literally kiss the wounds of Jesus in others. We too can heal. We need not fear the visibly wounded who remind us of our human frailty. The excluded and marginal, the ostracized and hidden, await our own touch. What Jesus asks us to do with our works of mercy is to touch and heal the wounds of those in need.

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<sup>5</sup> Francis, Morning Meditation (3 July 2013).

## ***Conclusion***

Let us ask the Lord to give us the grace to move beyond shallow pity to true compassion and to deepen in us the desire both to be healed of the leprosy of our own sin and to heal that of others. It is through communion with him in this Eucharist that Christ himself opens the heavens, and touches us once more with his compassion, inviting us to live more deeply as his disciples.

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