

Sunday 6 - B

ONE Conference

11 February 2018

Dear brother priests and deacons, consecrated women and men and dear lay faithful of the Archdiocese of Vancouver: friends all in Christ Jesus who have come together to share the joy of the Gospel:

Introduction

Before addressing the Word of God proclaimed for us today, I wish to express how good it is for us to be here in such a large gathering of the People of God from all over the Archdiocese who have come to hear Abbot John, Dr. Josephine Lombardi, Father James Mallon, Dr. Deborah MacNamara, Jake Khym and Brett Powell. Thank you for your inspirational talks and for sharing your wealth of experiences in ministry to help us on our evangelizing mission as a local Church. You have affirmed our need to deepen our discipleship and you have encouraged us, despite our frailty and fear, to share the Good News of God's merciful love revealed in Jesus Christ,

There is an enormous treasure of charisms, gifts and ministries in this auditorium. But, as you have heard so often today, they are not to be locked away in a storehouse or preserved intact in an ecclesial museum. With the grace of the Holy Spirit, you have been empowered to fulfill Pope Francis' dream of a Church composed of missionary- disciples on fire with the love of God and ready, like the cured leper in today's Gospel, "to spread the word" (Mk 1:45) with such enthusiasm that many

will come to Jesus, as the Gospel affirms, “from every quarter” (Mk 1:45).

Moreover, when I look out, I see a truly magnificent manifestation of the 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 every corner of the Lower Mainland and beyond. Because of our closeness to Jesus, we are united in the common desire of all our ministries to make disciples.

Three Insights about Mission Drawn from the Gospel

But what light does today’s Gospel shed on our mission? I would like to suggest to you two insights about what we are to do that can be drawn from Jesus’ encounter with the leper as recorded by St. Mark.

1. Outsiders in Our Midst

Few afflictions at the time of Jesus – as is also the case still today – were more terrifying than that of leprosy. It was incurable and its diagnosis was nearly always a life sentence. As prescribed by the Mosaic Law, lepers were exiled from both the social and religious community (cf. Lev 13:45-46), excluded from worship in the Temple. “Imagine how much suffering and shame lepers must have felt: physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually! They were not only victims of disease, but they felt guilty about it, punished for their sins!

Theirs was a living death.”¹

In addition, lepers inspired fear, contempt and loathing, and so they were abandoned by their families, shunned by their neighbours, cast out by society. Nobody wanted to touch them. They lived without the touch of another human being.

While lepers are absent from our parishes, if we are not attentive, we can all too readily set up such divisions between “us” and “them.” We can ostracize and exclude, make fun of those who aren’t as engaged as we are. We can hold on to our ministries and not invite others to take our place. We can resent the Christmas and Easter Catholics who crowd our churches a couple times a year.

Dear friends, to be welcoming communities we must seize the opportunities the Lord places before us to proclaim God’s welcoming love. Our parishes are not to become, as Pope Francis says so often, “self-referential”; that is, they are not to concentrate on themselves, clinging to tried and failing methods, the focusing on self-importance. A “self-referential Church keeps Jesus Christ within herself and does not let him out.”²

¹ Francis, Homily (15 February 2015).

² Jorge Mario Bergoglio, Address before the Conclave (12 March 2013).

And elsewhere the Holy Father has written: “More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: ‘Give them something to eat’ (Mk 6:37).”³

But this defensive hunkering down will not do for the Pope, because “missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church’s activity.”⁴ He challenges those who think that she should be inward-looking, protected by closed security doors, where only the supposed elect are allowed in and which shelters those afraid of bearing witness in the world. These enemies of evangelization have plagued us far too long. Let’s be determined, therefore, to make our parish families open and inviting to those on the outside who, like each one of us, yearns deep-down – even if unconsciously – to belong, to feel the warmth of God’s tender mercy.

2. “Moved with Pity”: Jesus’ Compassion and Ours

Secondly, this Gospel places before us Jesus who is “moved with

³ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49.

⁴ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 15.

pity” (Mk 1:41), though a better translation might be “he was stirred in his depths 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 oneself. Jesus is like this: he suffers together with us, he suffers with us, he suffers for us.”⁵ He took upon himself our infirmities, he made himself “a leper” so that we might be cleansed.⁶

God’s mercy overcomes every barrier, and Jesus’ hand touched the leper. He did not stand at a safe distance and didn’t act by delegating, but he placed himself in direct contact with the man’s contagion. In precisely this way the leper’s ills – and this means our sins – became the motive for contact: “He, Jesus, takes from us our diseased humanity, and we take from Him his sound and healing humanity.”⁷

That’s why “Jesus stretched out his hand and touched [the leper]

⁵ Francis, Angelus (3 August 2014).

⁶ Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (12 February 2012)

⁷ Francis, Angelus (15 February 2015).

him” (Mk 1:41) who had been so isolated and alone. “He wanted to touch him and restore him to the community without being ‘hemmed in’ by prejudice, conformity to the prevailing mindset or worry about becoming infected.”⁸ His touch was part of his saving mission. “He touched to heal: not only leprosy but the leper; not simply flesh but the lesion that is sin and the hurt that scars the human heart.”⁹

This gesture and Jesus’ words, “be made clean!” (Mk 1:41) contain the whole history of salvation. They embody the Lord’s will to heal each of us, to purify us from whatever disfigures God’s image in us.

For Jesus, what matters above all is reaching out to save those far off, healing their wounds and restoring them God’s family. That’s the same clarion call he gives to us and our mission. Not to be afraid of going out to others who appear to be far off. Too often we think of our “parish family” as only those who come to Sunday Mass. But what about all those baptized Catholics, let alone the unbaptized, who are in our neighbourhood? This is our mission territory – our little section of the field-hospital of the world – where the wounded are waiting for our healing touch. It is close at hand!

⁸ Francis, Homily (15 February 2015).

⁹ Walter J. Burghardt, *Grace on Crutches* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986), 107.

A parish of missionary disciples wants to go out and save those who are lost. The Mosaic Law favoured casting out the diseased person, but Jesus shows us the thinking of God, who in his mercy embraces and accepts the leper, “turning evil into good, condemnation into salvation and exclusion into proclamation. . . . The way of the Church is precisely to leave her four walls behind and to go out in search of those who are distant, those essentially on the ‘outskirts’ of life. It is to adopt fully God’s own approach, to follow the Master who said: ‘Those who are well have no need of the physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call, not the righteous but sinners’ (Lk 5:31-32).”¹⁰

Conclusion

As we continue this Mass, let us ask the good Lord to give us the grace to go out to the outsiders in our midst and welcome them home so that they too can hear the healing words of Jesus, “Be made clean” (Mk 1:45). It is through communion with him in this Eucharist that Christ himself opens the heavens, and touches us once more with his compassion, strengthening us to live more deeply as his disciples and to share the joy of living the Gospel with others.

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¹⁰ Francis, Homily (15 February 2015).