

The 6th Sunday – Year B

**Readings: 2 Kings 5: 1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9: 24-27;
Mark 1: 40-45**

An obvious theme of the readings today has to do with healing. We are all aware of the desperate need in our world for healing - we all know of people who suffer a great deal emotionally, physically and spiritually. We may well be aware of wounds that we carry from the times we have felt rejection, hurt, failure, and betrayal. We are also acutely aware of the suffering of communities and the need to overcome divisions among peoples. The need for healing is all around us; we are all well aware of it.

When Jesus walked this earth, he was clearly aware of all this. At this early stage in Jesus' public ministry, he is setting about proclaiming and extending the Reign of God. This is a servant ministry. We don't know whether Jesus ever explicitly identified himself as a servant, but his followers and early Christian communities certainly interpreted Jesus' mission this way. Paul says that Jesus took on the form of a servant, becoming obedient

even to death. All the gospels make much of servant imagery to explain who Jesus was. He brought the compassion of God to ordinary human beings and he was angry at systemic injustices that held people in poverty and oppression which become the seedbeds of violent protest.

In the first century world of Jesus, everyone believed that illness, especially leprosy, was the result of sin. They had no knowledge of micro-biology that we have today, and no access to the scientific discoveries that are such a gift and a problem for us in our time. So to be ill with leprosy in the first century was nothing short of disaster. It was literally a living death for those who contracted it; a situation very tough for us to imagine. People thought an illness indicated that you (or your parents) had sinned. So if you became sick with leprosy, you were spiritually and socially tainted. You would have to leave your work and your home, and live on the outskirts of the village. So people feared leprosy like no other disease. There are two chapters in Leviticus of purity laws dealing with it. It meant exclusion from your family, your work, and your community; and then the sufferer faced abject poverty and a terrifying fight for survival.

The man with leprosy, therefore, comes to Jesus. He has been declared by the priests to have a communicable disease and banished from the community. The man has probably been back to the priests in desperate attempts to plead for restoration so that he can work again and eat and be with his family. In all likelihood, that petition would have been refused. So now he is desperate. He comes to Jesus and says, "Will you dare Jesus, to do for me what those priests back there in the village are refusing to do? Will you declare me clean?" Jesus does indeed dare. The tone of the Greek text here suggests Jesus is angry. English translations make the language sound nice, almost poetic, but in fact the Greek says that through this exchange Jesus is "snorting with indignation." (In the Hebrew language anger is in the nose; angry people have hot nostrils and when God is angry his breath is hot!). In defiance of the temple system and assuming the prerogative of the priests, Jesus declares the man clean, even going as far as to touch the leper. Jesus should have contracted the disease himself, but instead the leper becomes clean, and the power of the symbolic order is overthrown.

Modern readers of these stories tend to focus on the physical cure as if Jesus were some kind of magician. But this story is about so much more than that. This is about Jesus challenging to the symbolic power structures of the day, the powers serving to exclude people from participation in the community and that kept people locked in cycles of abject poverty and oppression. Jesus has thrown down a challenge to the power brokers, the religious leaders and those operating the purity code. He is already on a collision course with them, which as we know will culminate on the cross.

Jesus sends the man back to the priests. The man's task is not to publicise a miracle, but to help confront an ideological system. The man is sent to help confront the purity apparatus, which the priests control. His healing is meant to witness against the purity system that has made this man a victim. Here there are echoes of the Malachi oracle we heard at Candlemass. God promised to cleanse the sons of Levi until they bring their offerings in true justice, and that God will witness against those who use the temple system to oppress the poor and marginalised. The

problem is that Jesus' strategy backfires. The man aborts his mission. He goes public and Jesus is forced into hiding. Jesus is now a marked man. He is considered unclean because of his contact with the leper and he has provoked conflict with the temple hierarchy and the operators of the purity apparatus. That is why Jesus hides. His act of healing is risky and costly. He has extended the offer of God's unconditional love to a leper and he has done so at great cost to himself.

This is the Christ who comes to meet us. He comes to inspire us with a faith that believes the Good News of God can overcome the causes of human suffering; injustice, oppression, fear, violence, hate, and jealousy. He wants to inspire in us a willingness to take risks in bringing love and forgiveness for God and the gospel. Jesus came to give people their dignity, to identify with the needy, to find justice for those who had been wronged. The reason the healing miracles are profound is they are not about magic. They are fundamentally stories of inclusion; inclusion of lepers, inclusion of the blind and the lame, inclusion of sinners and outcasts. That is why Jesus' healing ministry was so profound and brave, risky and costly. It made a lot of people

sit up and notice. They called Jesus a servant because he took the needs of the people seriously and did something about it.

The ministry of Jesus then, is not access to some weird, private, supernaturally religious experience. It is the simple, generous force of God's grace and goodness. It is the offer of God's unending, costly love; it is God's unconditional confidence in us to enjoy the fullness of life for which we were made. When we look at our world today, the need for healing is obvious. 80% of people alive today, nearly all in the third world, live in poverty and social dislocation. God can only give faithful love and forgiveness. God is prepared to take big risks to offer that love. God is looking for bold disciples with a faith that is willing to take similar risks trusting in the power of the gospel to overcome evil in all its forms. We are called to work with God to bring healing and to extend God's love. It will be an adventure. It may involve us in our own journey to the cross. It will require that we learn to be at home with who we are and to love the bits of us we would rather hide. It will involve us in restoring the dignity of outcasts, in welcoming foreigners and strangers, in being with those who are discouraged, as well as calming storms, driving

exploiters out of the temple, feeding hungry crowds, and finding extra wine at weddings when the caterers miscalculate. As Naaman was washed and made clean in the Jordan, so too, are we washed and made clean by the death and resurrection of Jesus. The leper in today's gospel is at table with Christ, and we all join in the feast of those who are made clean in the living water which is God's word in Jesus.