

Homily for Sunday, February 14, 2021

Leprosy is a terrible disease, and contagious to certain groups of people. Our first reading today sets up some of the background for our gospel passage about an encounter a leper had with Our Lord.

Obviously medical knowledge thousands of years ago was less than it is today. But today's medical knowledge is built upon well-reasoned approaches from earlier times. Our Old Testament reading displays how the community dealt with skin rashes that might prove to be dangerous. The individual with a sore that might indicate leprosy would separate themselves from contact with others while the illness healed or progressed until a determination could be made.

Leprosy is devastating to the body. And being distant from others makes one subject to loneliness, frustration, depression and feelings of uselessness. One cannot work, so family would need to find some way of supporting itself. The person would need to rely on others to provide basic sustenance. For an Israelite, the separation meant they could not be present at the liturgies and sacrifices that sustained their souls.

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While individual sicknesses are not punishments for individual sins, from ancient times sickness has been used as a metaphor for sin. Sin is a spiritual sickness. Just like a cold weakens the body and makes it hard for us to concentrate, sin weakens our ability to live in a robust, moral way.

And what leprosy does to an infected person is perhaps the strongest metaphor of what happens to the soul of the person trapped in sin. One can't see clearly what is right. One does not have the strength of will to do what is good. Sin hurts one's relationship with others, and makes it hard to love them. Sin makes it hard for the person to accept the grace of God to come back and grow in love and holiness.

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Today, perhaps each of us can ponder the truth that, spiritually, "I am a leper!" Today, we can ask, "What do I need to be cleansed of? What is eating away at me? What are the things I have done that darken my intellect and weaken my will and tempt me to separate myself from Christ and His body the Church? What are the sins I need Jesus to cleanse? What do I need forgiveness for? What do I need to cry out

to Christ to heal me of? If I were healed of one thing today, what would it be that would cause me to tell everyone about Jesus?”

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Reading a passage that speak of people separating themselves from others certainly is made newly relevant in this year of COVID-19. Many people, especially the poor, are at risk. And many people, especially the elderly, are confined or separated from others.

This is a time when we are grateful for the doctors and nurses who risk their lives to reach out and touch the sick. This is a time when we are perhaps more aware of the loneliness of those who have few people to talk to and to help them.

May we help them.

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The website of the Center for Disease Control says this about the word origin for Quarantine. “The practice of quarantine, as we know it, began during the 14th [fourteenth] century in an effort to protect coastal cities from plague epidemics. Ships arriving in Venice from infected ports were required to sit at anchor for 40 [forty] days before landing. This practice, called quarantine, was derived from the Italian words...which mean 40 [forty] days.”

We are about to enter into the roughly forty day period called Lent. If we see it as quarantine, we mean it in a positive way. Lent is a stepping away from the regular, so that we can again see more clearly what is important. A Lenten quarantine is not meant to separate us from those who are important, but to focus on those who are important.

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I offer you one suggestion, and two examples, for all of us this Lent.

The suggestion is that as you decide what you will do and what you will give up this Lent, decide who you want it to be for. I have found that my Lenten practices are more powerful (and I stick with them better) when I do them for a particular intention. The intention might be to rid myself of a particular bad habit.

So – have a clear intention for which your Lenten practices are dedicated.

The two examples of possible intentions are:

First – the intention can be for those who are lonely and weak because of the Coronavirus quarantines. What practices this Lent can be offered up to help them?

Second – the intention can be for strengthening and healing families. Today is World Day of Families. And starting next Month, Pope Francis wants us to dedicate a year to families. Families are the Domestic Church. The Church is a family, and a family of families. This Lent is good time to pray for families and offer up our penances to a renewal of families.

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One more time:

I suggest you choose an intention to offer up your Lenten practices. It will make them more real.

And two examples of intentions are: For those who are separated from others during this pandemic; and for families.