

Sixth Sunday Year B

1 Corinthians 10:31-11.1, Mark 1:40-45

Fr Peter Groves

Years after the disease ceased to be a danger in this country, the word leprosy retains its stigma. Despite the fact that Leprosy is not significantly contagious – perhaps as many as 95% of people are naturally immune – leper colonies remain to this day, particularly in north Africa and the Indian subcontinent. It is estimated that two to three million people are permanently afflicted by the disease, despite the immeasurable improvements in prevention and treatment seen in the 20th century. Although its sufferers are far removed from you and me, the power of shunning and enforced separation which the word leprosy invokes makes it a word full of nastiness and fear.

The eleventh chapter of the Book of Leviticus talks about the ritual consequences of dealing with various types of skin diseases. What is now correctly called Leprosy – Hansen’s disease – is not actually what is meant by the catch all Hebrew word “sara’t”, but the Greek and Latin words lepros and lepra have long been used to translate this passage. The

leper whom Jesus meets in Mark's first chapter is, we may assume, someone subject to these Levitical restrictions because he suffers from a skin disease. Whether he is a leper in the modern medical sense is less important.

Today the world celebrates another convenient mistake of the Christian tradition. St Valentine's day has not featured in the church's calendar since the reforms which followed the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. In fact, were today not a Sunday, we would be celebrating two missionaries to the Slavs. Hence the rhyme, Roses are red, Onions are odious, it used to be Valentine, now it's Cyril and Methodius. But it is the 14th of February either way.

There are several people we know of in the early church by the name of Valentinus. By far the most interesting of these is a second century theologian wrongly condemned by many of his successors for being a Gnostic, someone who rejected the goodness and reality of the created world and found in Jesus an escape.

Less interesting, because we know nothing about them, are two Roman martyrs by the same or a very similar name, one

apparently a priest condemned to death under Claudius II in the mid third century, another a Bishop of Terni, perhaps slightly earlier. The date February 14th is, it is claimed, the date of one or other or both Valentines being buried on the Flaminian Way. Conveniently, the middle of February is also the Roman Lupercalia, a festival celebrating, among other things, fertility and the onset of spring. There is perhaps some connection between this coincidence of time, and the association of St Valentine with love, though no clear evidence of this connection exists. When and how the association does come about is very far from clear – there are some late medieval and renaissance allusions to love and St Valentine’s Day, but it’s fair to say – as with so many ancient traditions – that what we now call Valentine’s Day was largely invented in the 19th century.

It is easy to be cynical about Valentine’s Day, but there is much to be said for it. Indeed, after this mass, I shall be dashing round to the Covered Market to make sure I collect my wife’s roses by the 12noon deadline. Human beings, particularly male human beings, are not good at expressing the gift of love, and something which institutionalizes that expression, which gives us pause to think about and be

thankful for those whom we love is not a bad thing. There is much else to remember, however. Many people are single, and glad to be so. Many people are single and not so glad to be so. All of these people are just as important as those who claim to be in love, not least because the most spectacular Valentine's gifts and gestures are often given and made by those whose love has yet to learn what commitment and self-giving really mean.

If we have to object, as Christians, to the Valentine's Day cult of being in love, we can object to a single word. The word, "because". Valentine's Day, indeed contemporary culture, teaches us that love is about gaining something, about being thankful for the gift of love because it is a gift we receive, something which we have that we did not have before, something in which the character or the appearance or the material wealth of another person is the reason why we are in love with them. He loves her because her appearance is so attractive, she loves him because he spends thousands of pounds on her. Love is visual, expressed in appearance and in single events, not given and growing in relationship and in commitment by giving rather than by receiving.

The love of God has no because. God does not love you for anything which is true about you. God does not love you because you love him, or because you respond to his call, or because you seek to help others love him as well. God simply loves you, because love is what God is. There is, therefore, absolutely no question of receiving, or gaining, where the love of God is concerned. It makes no sense to think of God being enriched by us. The enrichment is entirely ours, the gift is entirely gratuitous. God gains nothing.

Nothing less commercial, nothing less presentable, could be imagined than the welcome, the physical embrace of the ugly, the diseased, the untouchable. We have no lepers in our society, but we have plenty of people we would like to avoid: those suffering from addiction, those who press us for money in the street, those whose homelessness makes us feel guilty and powerless, those whose anger at life we cannot comprehend. And there are examples closer to home – those we find boring, those who lack friends, those whose hygiene is not what it might be, those whose shyness makes them silent, those whose shyness makes them talkative, those whose illness we would rather not think about, those whose grief we would rather not share.

The love of God which we do share and celebrate in this sacrament is the love of God which embraces the leper, which seeks out and welcomes all those people we would rather not concern ourselves with, which delights in engaging the very person next to whom we would rather not sit. The love of God can never be a Valentine's Day gift because it can never be presentable, never be respectable, never justifiable, never be explained. There is no because for the love of God, but there is a because for the lack of that because. There is a reason why God's love is unreasonable, and that reason is God himself, love itself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the eternal giving and receiving of love which is the only source of all which is created.