

6th Sunday Year B 2018
Sunday before Lent
Fr Peter Groves

Mark 1.40-45

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. What is more important is that he is excluded from society. He is an outcast.

This outcast stands on the edge of the community, but also on the threshold of faith. He approaches Jesus with words of trust. If you will, you can make me clean. Drawn in by the presence of Christ, he is transformed by his love. He is, in other words, a representative of every Christian, of you and me, of the church itself, a stranger now made welcome.

But notice the effect of his welcome. The leper is a perfect representative of faith not because he gets it right, but because, having received the grace of God in Christ, he then goes and gets it wrong. Jesus commands him to tell no-one, but simply to fulfil the correct ritual procedure. But the leper instantly fails. Rather than keep quiet, he spreads the word

all over town, shouting the news so loudly that Jesus is forced to protect himself by staying outside the town, by being himself excluded, by taking on the role which the one who has been restored has now left vacant.

This is the miracle of the incarnation. Jesus takes our place not as some crude judicial substitute, but as the one who is both the image of God and God himself, taking humanity's place so that humanity's place becomes the right hand of God. The leper is transformed by the love of God, brought from darkness into light, but it is Jesus who is driven out, excluded, forced outside the city to take the place of the one he has healed. It is that perfect representation which lies at the heart of the sacraments of God's love: the presence of Christ embracing us in all our everyday weakness, and reconciling us, again and again, to be conformed to the love of God and the way of discipleship.

Being so conformed is the goal of the Christian life, and the purpose of what we call Lent. It is not a coincidence that people prepare for Easter by celebrating the sacrament of reconciliation, or, as it is often put, by making their

confession. The reality of encountering the risen Christ in the grace of absolution is, for me at least, among the most powerful signs and experiences of grace which Christian life offers. We all know that we don't do as well as we should. We do get things wrong. We do make mistakes. But bringing to God our sins and our weakness, kneeling at the foot of the cross, we can feel the intimacy of Christ as he stoops to remove one by one the burdens which weigh us down, lifting them from us to as to nail them to the cross on which he hangs.

Confession is entirely misunderstood if thought to be an act of earning God's forgiveness, turning on a sacramental tap of grace by formulaic prayer, in order to go through the motions of repentance. In fact, the sacrament of reconciliation is the celebration of the love of God already at work in our lives, an action of the church whereby two people come together to rejoice at the grace of God in forgiveness. As the great Fr Herbert McCabe used to say, you do not come to the confessional to be forgiven, you come to the confessional because you are forgiven.

The leper who approaches Jesus is one whose situation is horrific beyond our imagining. And yet, despite his exclusion, despite the shunning and the fear which he has come to expect, he approaches Jesus in faith. Our case is more ordinary. We are, on the whole, run of the mill sinners, people who get it wrong and would like to get it right. But we suffer from a further sin, a perverse sort of pride whereby we are convinced, each of us, that we, individually, we, singularly in ourselves, are uniquely evil. We think that those who think well of us and love us are simply deluded, because we are pretty good at putting on a decent show to the world, but the truth is that if people knew how awful we really were in ourselves, we would be shunned just like the leper. But the point with the leper is that he does actually have a disease, he cannot doubt what is wrong with him. We, on the other hand, are engaged in a sort of vanity of unworthiness where we have convinced ourselves that our sins are so much greater than anyone else's. And the fact is, they are not. Our sins are rather boring. Because sin is rather boring. Precisely because it is boring, it dresses itself up as exciting and enticing, and we are foolish enough to be taken in.

So it is that we are afraid of coming to the confessional. How terrible it would be if someone else found out just how awful we are. No. How boring it would be if someone else found out just how boring we are, that is the reality. God gives us the confessional as a tool for our day to day lives, to celebrate the fact that what ought to be sorrowful – reflecting on and acknowledging our sins – is made by the sacrament of reconciliation into an expression of Easter joy, an encounter with the risen Christ who raises us to new life with the grace which he is always lavishing upon us. Reconciliation is not a hurdle, it is a gift, a gift which makes real in our lives the shattering truth of God's grace, If you are wondering what you might do for God and for yourself this Lent, there is one very obvious answer. And it is, among other things, good for the soul.