

Sunday February 14th, 2021

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time Reflection

By: Jim McDonald

Today we pray in the Collect, “O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you.”

The readings today show us, in a dramatic way, what sort of transformation is needed for us to become a dwelling pleasing to the Lord, a temple of the Holy Spirit.

In the reading from Leviticus, we see just how serious an illness the ancient Israelites had to consider leprosy. According to the instruction given by God to Moses and Aaron, a leper had to be cast out of the community to live alone, announcing their presence everywhere they went, crying “Unclean, unclean!”.

We must note that being “unclean” also meant that a leper was ritually unclean and barred from participating in worship in the Temple. To a person of faith, this would have been a death sentence in a physical and spiritual sense. Imagine the loneliness they would have felt being separated from family and community, in addition to the physical suffering, perhaps even a sense of abandonment and a loss of self-worth. Does this sound familiar during this time of pandemic as our churches are closed, as we distance ourselves from family and friends, with so many people suffering emotionally and psychologically?

In the Gospel reading, a leper approaches Jesus, itself an act of courage, and humbly kneels in recognition of Jesus’ divine authority, and implores, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” His request is heart-felt and sincere and he not only desires to be cured of leprosy, but also to be made clean. It would have taken a great deal of courage, hope and trust to approach Jesus with this request, and perhaps with just a little doubt that Jesus would choose to heal him; he did say to Jesus, “If you choose...” (emphasis added).

Mark’s choice of words here is significant. By saying “if you choose”, also translated as “if you will”, Mark is pointing to the divinity of Jesus. Only God can will something to be, and it is done. Jesus is moved with pity and, I am sure, joy at the leper’s request and reaches out and touches him. This act alone is a sign of welcoming and comfort to the leper. No doubt his heart leapt at Jesus’s touch! Jesus does will that the leper be clean, and so he is made clean. Jesus instructs the leper to say nothing to anyone and to show himself to the priest and make an offering as proof to them of his healing.

The leper however, cannot contain his joy and excitement and proceeds to tell everyone he meets about how Jesus made him clean. The result is a sort of reversal of the (now former) leper's and Jesus' circumstances. The leper is free to return to community life and worship in the temple and Jesus must remain in the desolate places, unable to openly enter a town. Jesus would have anticipated this but did not hesitate to heal the leper anyway. At the leper's witness, people flock to Jesus, hoping for a share in Jesus' healing and joy in hearing his word.

In the second reading from 1 Corinthians, St. Paul shows the same attitude by instructing the Corinthians not to seek their own advantage, but to do everything for the glory of God so that many might be saved. This is certainly the mark of St. Paul's ministry. He sacrificed and suffered much so that as many as possible might hear the good news and be saved.

Do these readings not resonate with us today? Do we not sometimes feel unclean or unworthy? We read In Mark 1:15 where Jesus says "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the good news." The Creator of all things loves us so much that he sent His Son to reveal himself to us and to call everyone to repentance, to offer forgiveness for our sins, so that we can be made clean and become His children, dwellings pleasing to him.

Do we trust in His Divine Mercy, as the leper did? Are we willing to go to Jesus to confess our sins, trusting in His mercy so that we can receive the grace to become a dwelling pleasing to him? Jesus has told us – reminded us - through St. Faustina, "My Mercy is greater than your sins, and those of the entire world."

As we enter this season of Lent, let's turn to Jesus with trust in his Mercy. By doing so, we will be filled with joy and empowered by the Holy Spirit to "do everything for the glory of God."