

Homily February 11, 2018

The other day I visited a couple of classrooms in our school. One class was studying about the Middle Ages. The class greeter shared that she was doing a report on medicine and included information about leprosy. We chatted a bit. The medieval attitudes about leprosy were pretty similar to those highlighted in our scripture readings today, one from some 800 years before Jesus and then the Gospel from the time of Jesus. In fact, the mixture of stigma, isolation, fear of transmission and myth about its cause remained until early in the twentieth century.

Jesus' cure of the leper in today's Gospel was significant on different levels. The leper was certainly a man of faith to take the risk of illegally approaching Jesus for a cure. And Jesus claimed special power in exercising the cure. The cure was immediate and complete. The effect of the cure was a change in the cured man's appearance. The visible and unpleasant wounds disappeared. The cured man was able to re-enter society, once he submitted to the requirements of the Mosaic law about review of the cure and endorsement by the priest. This cure included Jesus' directive that the healed man not tell people about it. St. Mark makes great use of what scripture commentators call the "Messianic Secret." It was the idea that Jesus did not want the nature of His being Messiah to be misunderstood. So He told people not to speak about His miracles. He was not a Messiah who would wield power to materially enrich people. He was not to be perceived as a political Messiah. But the Gospel noted that the man could not help but to spread the good news of his healing and Jesus' popularity only increased.

Jesus continued to preach the message about what kind of Messiah He truly was. Jesus came to establish a spiritual kingdom, the kingdom of God. It is the kingdom that people enter in this life, in the context of the Church. It is the kingdom that is experienced in perfection and eternity after we die. While Jesus performed many miracles that caused material improvement of individual lives He would often use His miracles as the occasion to point to the greater healing of the forgiveness of sins. The healing of leprosy was especially rich in allegory as sin is something that disfigures our appearance in a way and separates us from the community. It is the miraculous and generous forgiveness of sin that enriches people's spiritual life, their place in God's kingdom here and hereafter. This weekend the Church reminds us of the beauty and power of the forgiveness of sins through our responsorial psalm. We repeated the refrain: "I turn to you, Lord, in time of

trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation." The verses of the psalm remind us of just what sort of trouble we are talking about. They speak of having faults taken away, sin covered. They refer to acknowledgment of sin and its connection to forgiveness. And the psalm ends by calling us to rejoice since, because of that forgiveness, we are just and upright of heart.

The time for the Messianic secret is long gone. Since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ His disciples, His followers, you and I, have been charged with letting the world know about Jesus the Messiah. He is the Messiah who wants to enrich us so that we can be the best imitators of Him that we can be. In our second reading St. Paul sets a standard for us. He told us in everything we do we should do for the glory of God. Everything we do should make God look good. Everything we do should affirm the value and effectiveness of the teaching of Jesus. We don't always do that. Sometimes our actions make us appear that we ignore God or don't seem to take Him seriously or consider Him a credible source of truth about how to live our lives. Perhaps that's why the Church, so often, in the opening collect of the Mass has us pray that through the Mass we can be enriched so that we can better reflect the goodness and grace and love of Jesus.

The Lenten season that begins this Wednesday should be seen as a gift from Jesus and His Church to press us to greater efforts to refine our ability to give glory to God in everything we do. Our personal programs of prayer, self-denial and charitable giving will help us to do just that. Our prayer and self denial will open our minds and hearts to better discern the ways we may have fallen short. Our Lenten schedule provides a number of extra opportunities for the sacrament of penance in order to turn to the Lord for the special healing He gives us in that sacrament.

On this final Sunday before Lent there are a couple of activities that we are pointing out in helping everyone with their Lenten programs. The pamphlets for reflection on our experience of the Mass are available. Those are the pamphlets being used for small group gatherings. And there are sign-up sheets for the various groups. (including two conveniently scheduled after the 10:00 AM Sunday Mass. And children will be handing out the rice bowl materials as well. The rice bowl activity is a great way to combine self-denial with almsgiving. As I noted last year it is simply a matter of redirecting money. Money that might be spent on a food or entertainment that is being given up for Lent is redirected to the rice bowl which will be collected and handed over to Catholic Relief services at the end of Lent. Last year we did distributed more rice bowls

than before, and our collection increased as well. But we know many rice bowls never made it back here. So we are going to plan a special collection in the context of the liturgy on the Sunday after Easter.

As I noted, Lent is a gift, it starts on Wednesday, but we can begin unwrapping the gift now with picking up a rice bowl and signing up for a small group. Then, all the more, at Easter our hearts truly will be filled with the joy of salvation.