

# Homily on Mark 1:40-45

February 9, 2018

**Intro:** Biblical leprosy is a difficult for us to understand. It is not Hansen's disease, the incurable and not very contagious leprosy of modern leprosaria. For the time of Jesus it was any of a series of diseases from which fluids exude from the skin. It could be what we call scabies, or severe acne, or eczema, or psoriasis. What made the leper unclean was not just fear of infection from his body, but the general category of clean and unclean in ancient cultures.

The ancients considered unclean or impure whatever was out of its ordinary place. (For us, dirt is good earth out of place.) For the Jews, God was the author of life, and so all blood and other bodily fluids belonged to him. Even natural life-giving emissions like menstrual blood or semen are out of the body as their proper place, and so they make one unclean. All the more then, unhealthy emissions like skin diseases made one unclean. To be cleansed from one's impurity there were ritual acts; for leprosy, one had to be examined and declared clean by the priests. This is a brief, inadequate, background for today's gospel cleansing of a leper.

**Mark** is continuing Jesus' mission in the towns of Galilee. A leper approaches him, which is already forbidden, as we heard in today's first reading from Lev. This leper is supposed to be outside of the general population, which he wards off by shouting "Unclean! Unclean!" when anyone approaches him. In short, he is ostracized from his normal society, his father and mother, his siblings, his friends he is excluded from the Temple, where he might find God. This is the ultimate pain of leprosy. Think of yourself, without cell phones or skype, without any of your relatives or friends. That this unclean leper breaks these conventions, means he is desperate, without any hope of a short-time cure. He has heard of Jesus' miraculous power of healing, and throws himself on Jesus' Mercy.

Now it is Jesus' turn to break the conventions. Moved by compassion he reaches out and touches the unclean man, thereby breaking the Law and incurring his own uncleanness. He heals the man with his divine power, but he asks the man to go to the priests for his certification of health, as the Law prescribes.

His request that the man keep the healing silent is in vain. Obviously, when he rejoins his family they want to know how he is now healed. And so he tells anyone else who inquires. This causes Jesus' fame to grow, and he is overwhelmed by people who request healing. He is unable to preach the good news which is his mission, and so, Jesus winds up outside of the city, in the kind of deserted places which lepers inhabit.

## The Meaning for us:

First, Jesus is the Son of God, with divine power to heal any and all diseases, physical or moral. The only prerequisite is that we ask in faith for that healing.

Second, we ourselves are lepers. The power of this gospel for us lies in our ability to admit that we are lepers and ask for help. Only then can we be healed. Many of us have addictions which have so far been resistant to psychological healing or the love of family. We know that they ostracize us, separate us from our families, who eventually wash their hands of us. All of us have some kind of moral failure which keeps others from joining the community---our family, our neighborhood, our country, our Catholic community. The problems of our country and of our Church stem from my lack of faith in Jesus' power to transform my life. We need healing.

Third, if Jesus does heal us, we will want to tell others about His power as Son of God. Our skeptical friends, even our lukewarm Catholics friends might find our new-found enthusiasm annoying or challenging. We may be ostracized by our faith-filled convictions. But we will find new friends, new family---those who have

made Jesus the center of their lives. We will be forming the community which Jesus envisioned---those who break the laws which keep us from compassion and love for others, even our enemies. We will find the way to peace, first for ourselves, and then for our world.