

VI Sunday – Ordinary Time – Cycle B

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

Corinthians 10:31-11:1

Mark 1:40-45

No Mere Juridical Pardon

As we listen to the words of today's first reading from the book of Leviticus, we may be shocked by the seemingly cold-hearted attitude toward those who were afflicted with such a terrible disease as leprosy. The prescriptions applied to the leper strike us as, not only harsh, but also humiliating. Yet we would do well to remember that the mentality that prevailed in Israel and most of the neighboring societies at the time was a strictly juridic one, based almost exclusively on the precepts of the law. Illness and most any other suffering were seen as the consequences of violating the law. Hence, God was often understood as the Judge that applied the punishment required by such juridic violations.

However we perceive this juridic attitude and its manifestations in the social life of the People of God, through our vantage point thousands of years later, and with the benefit of the revelation of Mercy in Christ, one thing becomes very clear, the Israelites were keenly aware of the atrocity of sin and its dreadful consequences, regardless of the obvious limitations and dreadful attitudes that their legalistic view of life imposed.

Today, we seem to have swung to the other extreme. We have become captivated by what His Holiness, Benedict XVI, called the "*tyranny of relativism*", on April 18, 2005, even before he was elected Pope. Earlier, in the twentieth century, Dr. Karl Menninger, psychiatrist, addressed the lack of conscience of sin in modern times in his classic work, ***Whatever happened to sin?*** as he reflected on the atrocities of the Holocaust and other tragedies of that century.

Relativism has spawned an attitude of moral ambivalence, and even a total rejection of morality as a forming factor in society. Consequently, such atrocities as we witnessed in the twentieth century, and are witnessing even now, such as the holocaust of abortion, political demagoguery and social injustices, are tolerated and even promoted and chosen by our society. We have jettisoned the reality of sin from our consciousness and have all but canonized the horrible consequences of such a choice. We are no longer aware that we are called to protect ourselves and our loved ones from the plague of sin and its consequences.

What, then, is the path to follow in our time? First, I believe that we need to awake to the fact that ignoring the cancer of sin in our personal lives and in our society has not made us impervious to its consequences. That, indeed, we have become insensitive to sin's deadly effects. Secondly, I believe we need to take our eyes off ourselves and look upon God, to see how He sees our calamitous condition and how He responds to it. In this we will encounter a God who will not be defined by our narrow-heartedness.

While praying with the Scriptures presented by the Church for this Sunday, and sharing them with a group of brothers and sisters, parishioners, as I do every week, I noticed the connection between the first reading from Leviticus, and the Gospel reading from Mark. The reading from Leviticus ends with the limitations applied to those who suffered leprosy: "**he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.**" (*Leviticus 13: 46*). In the Gospel reading, Jesus reaches out and touches a leper, and heals him. Because of His powerful gesture and act of healing, Jesus, too, had to stay outside: "**Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country.**" (*Mark 1: 45*). Even though the reasons for having to stay outside of the company of others were different, nonetheless there is a connection.

I believe that Jesus, in curing the leper, did not ignore the fact that all evil in our lives, even if it is not brought about by our personal sinful choice, is nonetheless caused by the radical disorder that sin causes in our lives and in the world, and so He sends the healed leper to the priest, that according to the law of Moses, he could be declared whole and reintegrated to the community. There is no denial of sin here. Rather, there is a new and radical encounter of God with the sinner and the victims of sin.

Jesus does not extend a merely juridical pardon to sinners. He came to be one with us and to take onto Himself the consequences of our disobedience and sin. He took onto Himself that which we could not be freed from by our own thinking or doing.

At this moment of His ministry, He had to stay out of the towns because He had healed a leper and the multitudes were coming to Him to solve their immediate problems. Later, He would be pushed out of the Holy City, a spectacle to all who saw Him. "**The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean, unclean.'**" (*First reading: Leviticus 13: 45*). Jesus went to Calvary, not only with torn cloths, but with His sacred flesh torn to pieces by the Roman flagellum. The hair of His Sacred Head was not only unkempt, but tangled and soaked in the blood that issued from His wounded forehead, stabbed by a crown of thorns. Jesus' face was not covered by a tattered cloth to hide His countenance, rather it was in full display to all, covered with the wounds and bruises caused by the blows rained upon His beautiful face by soldiers and guards alike. He did not cry "unclean, unclean" on His way to the Hill of Redemption; it was his cruel enemies who declared the Innocent One to be a criminal; and all that came from His lips regarding His persecutors was: "Forgive them, Father".

No, there is no mere juridic pardon here! What we behold is the infinite mystery of Mercy become man, who took to Himself what was justly ours, to give to us what was His alone, the condition of Son of God and all that this implies.

We have not been merely pardoned; we have been healed! We have not been merely spared; we have been adopted as children of God. The Father has not only saved us in His Son; He has made us co-heirs with Christ of eternal glory (*Romans 8: 17*)

Now, having received such blessings from God our Father, in His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit, are we not to rejoice in such a gift of pure mercy? Are we not to approach the Seat of Mercy, which is the Sacred Heart of Jesus upon the Cross, mindful of our sin, yet trusting in divine love? Are we not to bathe in the shower of Mercy that comes from the Heart of the Risen One, that we may be restored to incense and live for His glory?

One more aspect of my meditation remains. We need to remember that all that God gives us, He intends that we should give it to others. If Jesus became one with us in our desolation we are to become one with those who suffer, whether because of their own personal sin, or as victims of others' sinfulness. We are called to live lives of reparation and service, voluntarily embracing the suffering of others so as to make manifest the love of Christ that unites us in solidarity. The imitation of Christ will, indeed, set us free from egotism and fear of suffering, and will manifest God's glory in our midst. We need to remember that, as disciples of Christ, we are to live under His discipline of love. If we carry in our bodies the cross of the Lord, ours will be the gift of His life.

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory to Him Forever!

In His Majesty's service,

Father Omar A. Huesca, A.F.S. (A forgiven sinner)