

Beloved in Christ, the theme that runs through the readings is that Jesus is the friend of the **Lonely and the Outcast**. The first reading has painted a very sad image among the People of God such as **clean and unclean**. In their journey to the Promised Land, Moses had given to the people this provision: "The Lord your God walks in the midst of the camp to protect you ... you must be sacred that the Lord may not see anything indecent in it; otherwise, he will turn away from you" (Dt 23:15). In our first reading, Moses puts this prescription in the Lord's mouth: "Put out of the camp all lepers and all who suffer from an infection... You must not allow them in the camp where I dwell among them ..." (Nm 5:1-3; 13:1-2). Some biblical scholars have noted that the Law of Moses had practical benefits for God's Chosen People because they anticipated modern practices of personal and medical hygiene. One of these was the practice of quarantining people of leprosy, who were presumed to be contagious, in order to save the community; however, it came at a high price to those who suffered such **disfiguring illnesses, loneliness and isolation**.

The Gospel account of Jesus' encounter with the leper goes far beyond the prescription of the Law. In approaching Jesus, the afflicted man violates the Law by engaging him; Jesus in turn renders himself ritually unclean. Maybe that is why the man comes to Jesus with obvious humility ("If you wish you can make me clean..."), according to St. Bede, the man recognized that Jesus had power to cure him. Hence he comes with **bold humility and strong faith**. Jesus' actions speak louder than words. He reaches out and touches the afflicted man, saying simply, "I do will it. Be made clean" and he was healed. Jesus' action indicates that none of God's creatures are impure; we are all his children. Mk 40-42 portrays the leper's contravention of the provisions of the law. He is not only asking for healing, but also to be purified, so that he can go back into the society. What troubled him was the fact of being **excluded from civil and religious society**. His request moved Jesus with pity, so he stretches out his hand to touch him. The way Jesus treated the leper **with kindness and compassion** was as important as Jesus' miracles. Thus, he put his arm around him and said, "I want to! Now be clean". At once, the man's leprosy disappeared, and he was well.

The question I'm thinking of is why should Jesus assume an attitude so provocative against the law? What is it that drives him to violate the rule requiring exclusion? The fact is that he was moved with **compassion**. Matthew and Luke, who also tell the same event, omit this detail. Only Mark shows that, faced with the humiliating condition of the leper, **he was moved with pity** (Mk.1: 41). It is this very human feeling that leads him to ignore any scheme and custom which do not favor the good of man. The message is clear: in the face of calls for help, the disciple, like the Master, always *listens to the heart as St. Paul puts it in a nice way "be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor.11:1)*.

Again, Mark presents some difficulties of interpretation. How come Jesus sternly warns the leper? Why send him away in an apparently abrupt manner? Is it because before forbidding him to spread the news and then ordering him to present himself to the priests he wants them to see the healing? The two commands seem contradictory. In that, the cured leper may be a witness for the priests? The leper did not obey; he begins to spread the news and we are not told if he went to the priests or not. How come Jesus leaves and chooses deserts as dwelling places? Many people were looking for him, and therefore it would be more logical for him to be in a more accessible place. We begin to understand the meaning of **the prohibition to disclose the news of the healing**. For many years, the people of Israel **expected the Messiah. The prophets**—we observed—had shown signs of his presence, and **among them there was the cleansing of the lepers**. Jesus did not want anyone to know about who had done any of these signs. It would become clear to everyone that **he was the awaited Messiah**.

Finally, dear brothers and sisters, out of love for **the lonely and outcasts**, *Jesus could no longer openly enter any town*, but stayed in the rural areas, in deserted places, and people came to him from everywhere (Mk.1: 45). This was introduced **by the evangelist to highlight an exchange of residence**: first the leper who lived far away and could not enter the villages, now it is Jesus who has chosen to live in the condition of the leper. He has thus shown his desire to share the fate of all those people considered "unclean", in order to bring all God's children into the Kingdom. Let us do our best to show **love, respect and dignity to all God's children** especially the less privilege and the sick. Let us see Christ in them and treat them as we would treat Christ, so that he will say to us "come o blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you..." Amen!