

Lectio Divina – 6th Sunday - Year B

Contexts

Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- The Gospel is an 'action story', things happen quickly. Mark's use of 'immediately' occurs so often in the Gospel that the word is often omitted from translations.
- The disciples aren't heroes; they are more like us – well intentioned, sometimes misguided and stubborn men and women. One moment they can be admirable and the next so very dense, lacking all comprehension of what is really happening. Discipleship is a big concern in this Gospel. (Jude Siciliano OP)
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

Mark 1:40-45

- This Sunday's Gospel follows on immediately from last Sunday's Gospel.
- Jesus has set out to preach and heal in the other towns of Galilee when a leper comes to him and pleads for healing.
- People with any kind of shiny, scaly skin condition (eg psoriasis, seborrheic dermatitis) were usually considered to have leprosy (Biblical leprosy). This is not Hansen's Disease - the proper name for leprosy as we know it today.
- Keep in mind that all illness carried evil overtones in Jesus' day and were often considered a sign of a person's evil/sinful behaviour.
- Those considered to be leprous had to live outside the town. Their affliction was three-fold: 1. the disease or condition itself;
2. social exclusion and
3. religious stigma of being unclean and/or thought to be evil or sinful.
- As we saw last week, the result of the healing of Jesus is 3 fold:
1. healing of the actual ailment;
2. social restoration to family, work & community;
3. religious restoration – healed person is no longer unclean/evil/sinful and can now take their rightful place in the synagogue.
- Healing-Wholeness-Restoration is the 3 fold dynamic of the healing stories of Jesus.
- Note that it is the leper who comes to Jesus, not the other way around. The leper has broken the exclusion imposed on him by his illness in approaching Jesus. Remember last week when Jesus broke the double taboo of touching a sick person and a woman not his blood relative.

- The leper makes his request, "If you want to, you can make me clean" – better translation than 'cure me' especially given the context of what follows. Is this a request for cure or a declaration of ritual purity, or both?
- "Feeling sorry for him..." – some manuscripts have 'being angry' others, 'Moved with pity (compassion)'. No matter which is correct, Jesus is *deeply moved* and responds with both touch and word – stretches out his hand and touched him, 'Of course I want to!' 'Be cured! Jesus has again broken the ritual taboo about touching sick people.
- Remember the healing stories in the Gospels of the last 2 Sundays and this Sunday:
 1. Jesus heals the man in the synagogue with *his word* only;
 2. Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law *with touch* only;
 this week: Jesus heals the leper *with both word and touch*.
- Jesus, sternly (almost angrily) orders the man to say nothing but go and show himself to the priests to have his healing verified, offer the prescribed sacrifice in thanksgiving for the healing and to be declared ritually clean.
- Jesus does not want to be known as a 'wonder worker' – his messiahship is much more than that and cannot be understood without the cross.
- But the leper goes off and tells the story everywhere – can't really blame him for that; he is celebrating God's goodness to him. The former leper now becomes the preacher.
- But, Jesus is now unable to go openly into any town and must stay 'outside in places nobody lived' – the very places the leper himself had to formerly live. Note the role-reversal here! The excluded one is now included and the included one is now excluded. Jesus effectively becomes the leper. Barriers are now erected around Jesus. He can't preach in the synagogues. Just as the leper becomes the preacher, the preacher Jesus becomes the leper.
- Note that Jesus' act of kindness has an adverse impact on him. What does it all mean?
- But still the people come to Jesus. Why? Moved by the former leper's story, to see a wonder worker? Were they genuinely seeking the Messiah? Were they just curious about who Jesus is? Don't forget: nobody really knows who Jesus is – to the people of his day he is simply an unordained, itinerant Galilean preacher.

The Liturgical Context – why does the church choose this passage to reflect on for this Sunday?

The first reading this Sunday is from the book of Leviticus and details the OT view of leprosy as a 'swelling, a scab or shiny spot on a man's skin'. In this extract, a case of leprosy of the head is suspected and confirmed. It then prescribes what the person with leprosy must do: wear his clothing torn, his hair disordered, shield his upper lip and cry: Unclean! Unclean! And live apart, outside the camp, as long as the disease lasts.

Clearly, this reading sets the scene of what life was like for lepers and for the healing of the leper in the Gospel.

Perhaps some keys to the Gospel are:

- the leper *takes the initiative* and comes to Jesus for healing. So can we. We don't have to wait. We can take the initiative and ask for the healing we need.
- Jesus responds to the leper *with deep emotion*. Jesus is deeply moved with compassion for us and will act to help (save, cure) us.

- Jesus *always* wants to help: 'Of course I want to...'
- Jesus literally gives the leper his life back – he can go home, back to work, family, religious and social practice. The leper is now *in right relationship with God and neighbour*.
- Our experience of God's love, through Jesus, can turn us from outsiders to joyful preachers of God's compassion and mercy.
- And finally, a paradox: When we do good things, we, like Jesus, may experience adverse consequences, hence the saying: No good deed goes unpunished!

Reflection - Continuing the journey with Jesus

Following last week's Gospel, Jesus has set out to preach and heal in the other towns of Galilee when a leper comes to him and pleads for healing.

In Biblical times people with any kind of shiny, scaly skin condition were usually considered to have leprosy. This is not Hansen's Disease - the proper name for leprosy as we know it today.

Anyone suspected of being leprous had to live outside their town for fear of spreading the disease to others. They had to leave their home and family, their job, their community and their synagogue. They were dependent on others to bring them food and water.

This sense of fear and suspicion about lepers is a stark contrast to the welcome given by Jesus to the man in the Gospel.

He comes to Jesus and asks him to make him clean, to cure him. Jesus is deeply moved and touches the man (which must have required great compassion) and cures him. In healing the man, Jesus has done much more for him than simply relieving him of a distressing ailment. Jesus has literally given the man his life back. Now he can go home to his family, take up his job again and renew his religious practice in the synagogue.

In Jesus' day many people took illness, disease and disability as a sign that people were also morally ill, that they had sinned, done something wrong. By healing the sick, Jesus removes the taint of evil from them as well.

Interestingly, there is a kind of 'role-reversal' in this Gospel. In the beginning it is the leper who is the outcast, the one who must live outside the town. Because the cured man tells the story everywhere, Jesus now becomes the one who has to stay outside the towns and villages. Never the less, the people, like the leper, still come to him for healing.

Aware of our need for healing, we, too, can take the initiative by approaching Jesus. We will be met with welcome, compassion and love. We can be restored to our rightful place as beloved sons and daughters. We, too, can tell the story of what God has done for us.