

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 6 Year B 2021

Well, dear brothers and sisters we find ourselves in a situation we weren't quite expecting this time last week. We are reminded of the fragility and uncertainty of the situation we remain in. And we are reminded that the global community is still a good way off putting this pandemic behind us. Confronted as we are at this time of the power of disease to affect of our lives, how good it is today to hear in the gospel one of the many accounts of our Lord's gift of healing.

In the story put to us today, we hear of a man identified as leprous, who on his knees pleads with Jesus to cure him. Now, what is described here as leprosy could have been any number of skin ailments. Many of them in our day could be cured easily enough by some simple hygiene or by a course of pills or some ointment. But before modern medicine any break on the skin could lead to serious infections and even death. In the context of Jewish faith, the issue was compounded by laws of purity which rendered those who suffered such conditions as 'unclean'. Certainly, many conditions might 'clear up', as we would say. But if not, they would leave the sufferer ritually unclean, impure, and so left on the fringes of their society. So, we should see here the urgency – indeed, the desperation - of the poor fellow who comes to our Lord. His need is real, and he sees in Jesus one who might deliver him from both his physical illness and social isolation. The leprous man, we hear, falls to his knees in desperation and hope. On his knees he beseeches Our Lord for help. His stance of humility and of personal need reflects a profound spiritual truth, and one we would do well to reflect on carefully. Because it is the truth that we *are* in need, that there is One Alone who can save us, and that we *cannot put our trust in anything we do*, as the collect for last Sunday reminded us. The Christian is nothing but a sinner who has accepted the healing grace of God. The stance of leper in the gospel today ought to be ours: pleading on our knees, saying, *if thou wilt, thou canst cure me*.

But scratch the surface of many (if not most) church-going Christians we do not actually find this posture of humble need, but instead proud self-assertion. Scratch the surface and mostly we find Pelagians. What do I mean by this? Well, Pelagianism was, indeed is, a heresy named after the late fourth/early fifth century Celtic monk Pelagius. From Carthage in North Africa he taught that God's grace was *not* necessary for salvation. Human nature had not been totally corrupted by original sin. Our human weakness was due more to the environment effect of bad example.

Jesus 'saves' us by an example of pure love that can be imitated. For Pelagius, God's favour could be obtained by mastering the self. Our path to God could be achieved outside of God's grace, if only we pulled up our socks and tried hard enough. In other words, work hard enough we can save ourselves. We hear echoes of this all about us.

Now, Saint Augustine has been the church's most fierce champion of the primacy of God's grace. He took issue with Pelagius' claims and, thankfully, Augustine won the day! Pelagius was excommunicated and his ideas were condemned by various church councils. In line with Augustine, we can affirm that our nature is so deeply damaged that it leaves us unable to do any good without God's help. This is what we mean when we say, 'original sin.' Or, as St Paul says in Romans, 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.' This leaves us, as we would all know (and only too well), with the condition that leads us to commit actual sin and unable to do the good we want to do.

All this goes to say, that whatever hope and confidence, whatever optimism and positivism we bring to the human endeavour, we remain broken, that we are outside of a saving relationship with God, and that there is nothing *we* can do about it. For all our self-discipline and strength, for all our self-denial and the good we seek to do, it will never be enough. The highest human standard will always be short of God's standard. This is the problem, this is the bad news if you like, of the human predicament. The good news is that God has not left us to our devices! He has sent Jesus as saviour! So basic is this, that it needs restating again and again: Jesus Christ has saved you! It needs continuous restating because Pelagius and his ideas have an insidious way of reappearing and reasserting themselves! Because it seems we just cannot accept the idea that we're all that bad. We resist the notion that we cannot fix our problems. But the good news of the gospel can only take hold in our hearts and in our lives if we have accepted the bad news of our own sickness. The good news of the gospel will never truly be good news if Jesus is just there to inspire us by his beautiful moral teachings and his exemplary life. Hard work and self-denial replace grace and mercy. God does not make us right with him. We make ourselves right with him. If you doubt how prevalent this idea is, how often have you heard, or even said yourself, something like, 'If anyone deserves to be let into heaven, she does...' Or, 'Well, he wasn't a Christian and never went to church, but he lived like a Christian, and that's what counts.' Or, 'I don't have time for all that Christian mumbo jumbo. What counts is Christian values.' Our entire Anglican school system has gone down that track!

So often, we see Christian life as not much more than a kind of scorecard. I do certain things (go to mass, be nice, say my prayers once in a while, give my left-over money to some good cause) and God lets me into heaven. The trouble with getting-the-gold-stars-on-my-scorecard approach to salvation is that it results in a culture of minimalism. Do the basics of our Christian obligations, you get a gold star, and you get 'let in'. But really, this is just paganism with a thin veneer of Christianity! But perhaps nothing better describes contemporary Christian life than the idea that the minimal is enough! We think that all we need to do is to get enough of the gold stars! But that is because we have not yet woken up to absolutely essential idea: *that there is no score card!*

The life of virtue, our seeking to live the good and holy life, applying ourselves to the practices and discipline of the faith, only come from an awareness of what God has done. If God hasn't done much for us, well then, we won't sense the need to respond that much. If we do not perceive our illness or disease, if we think that our sin and alienation from God aren't that serious, if we think that there is not that much in our lives that needs to be healed, then we won't be moved to respond fully or generously.

How important, then, we look to leper in today's gospel. Behind his posture is the essential insight that we cannot save ourselves. If *we* adopted the stance of the leper - on our knees, recognising our need of God and of his healing grace - well then, it would be a very different story and we could not suppress our joy! We would respond, like the man at the heart of the story today, with exuberant excitement! We would seek to do all we could for love of God and his church. The irrepressible joy of the leper is because he is healed and made whole, because his life is restored. He cannot help but to respond in ecstatic joy. He cannot keep his mouth shut! Precisely because of his total and utter need. Precisely because only God in Christ could heal and make whole.

The vain hope that can save ourselves and fix our own problems haunts us even at this time. Our material and humanistic approaches to the crisis we remain in have left us short. As people of faith, we should stop imagining that scientists or the government or medicos can save us! While they have their necessary and important parts to play, they cannot speak to or heal the deepest afflictions of humankind. There are supernatural and spiritual dimensions to our problem which require supernatural and spiritual solutions. We cannot save ourselves! Today, I invite you, in union with the offering made at this altar, to pray simply: *Jesus, you are saviour of the world. Come, and save us. Come, and save me. Amen.*