

Commentary on the Gospel: “If you will, you can make me clean”

Gospel for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Cycle B), and commentary.

Gospel (*Mk 1:40-45*)

And a leper came to Jesus beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.”

Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I will; be clean.”

And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And he sternly charged him, and sent him away at once, and said to him, “See that you say nothing to any one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to the people.”

But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Commentary

This Gospel passage presents us with a new miraculous cure carried out by Jesus, which moreover is filled with great symbolic content.

According to the indications in the book of Leviticus, leprosy was viewed not only as a disease, but also as a grave form of ritual impurity that brought with it the obligation of being isolated while it lasted (*Lev 13:1-59*). Priests were charged with making the diagnosis in a person presenting symptoms, and to certify the cure, if it were to take place.

Hence those who contracted this disease, besides the great sufferings their illness brought, had to abandon their homes and towns and wander through uninhabited areas, far from other people. Having leprosy was like a “living death,” distanced both from ordinary life and religious practice. And thus its cure was almost like a resurrection from the dead.

That leprous man, on seeing Jesus and his disciples passing by in the distance, was moved with the hope

that Jesus could heal him. He approaches the Master and, still keeping his distance, kneels in his presence and expresses his confidence that Jesus has the power to heal him: “If you will, you can make me clean.”

Jesus takes pity on the man, and drawing close to him touches him and says: “I will; be clean.” And immediately the man was cured. The fact that he stretches out his hand and touches the wounded body of the leper makes clear that God ordinarily wishes to make use of gestures, of sensible signs, which become effective because of divine action. The simple fact of touching the man doesn’t effect the cure, but the power of God working through that gesture completely cures the person.

Something analogous happens in the Sacraments, which were instituted

by our Lord Jesus Christ. The Sacraments are sensible signs which, through the divine action working in them, effectively produce the grace they signify.

Leprosy can be seen as a symbol of sin, which is the true impurity of heart that leads to distancing oneself from God. In contrast to what the ancient prescriptions in Leviticus laid down, it is not physical sickness that separates us from God but the guilt, the moral and spiritual stains on the soul.

We too may sometimes feel stained by our faults and sins, and incapable of escaping by our own strength from that situation. Then is the time to address Jesus with the same cry of that leper: “If you will, you can make me clean.” And if our heart is determined to turn away from evil with God’s help, and we have recourse to the sacrament of

Reconciliation, we too will experience the effectiveness of his words: “I will; be clean.”

Whatever sins we may have committed – even when they have led to the death of our soul, like the sores on the skin of the leper had made him die in a certain way – they are made clean when we humbly confess them. Christ in this Sacrament, with infinite mercy, renews us and strengthens us by means of his ministers, enabling us to begin a new life filled with peace and joy.

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