

HOMILY

Deacon Jim Byrne

Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46; Psalm 32:1-2, 5, 11; 1 Cor 10:31—11:1; Mark 1:40-45

St. Francis of Assisi R.C. Church

Greenlawn, NY

February 12, 2012



Frequently, the first reading is connected with the Gospel reading, and today is no exception. Today, the word “leprosy” is a connector. In the book of Deuteronomy God instructs Moses on the law concerning cleanliness and emphasizes

cleanliness concerning skin disorders. In Old Testament time, right up to the time of Jesus, while various skin disorders such as ringworm were generally called leprosy, the Greek and Hebrew words did not always refer to leprosy as we know it today. Today we know leprosy as Hansen’s disease which can cause permanent damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes. In Old Testament times, anybody found to be suffering from a serious skin ailment, whether leprosy or not, was isolated and treated as an outcast from society until it was determined that he or she was healed, was “clean”, or that the disease was not infectious or that it was chronic. Leprosy could also attack clothes and homes, just like mildew or dry rot, so it was perceived not only as a human affliction. In the book of Deuteronomy God offers hope for those labeled as “lepers,” those suffering from leprosy, a hope based upon the natural healing of the skin infection and passing an examination by a priest. Although natural healing could take a long time, even many years, it was, nonetheless, a hope to which all lepers could aspire and a hope to return to normality. Indeed, Jesus visited the

house of one such ex-leper – “Simon the leper” - mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, indicating that the title can stick long after the problem has been cured and eliminated.

Today, when we hear the word “leprosy,” we think of a horrible, flesh infection that can now be cured. We may think of Saint Damien who spent his life among the lepers on Molokai, tending spiritually and physically to the outcasts, and giving his life in their service. I pray that nobody in this congregation has experienced the scourge of leprosy – has been ostracized, banished from society or treated as an outcast. And yet, I suspect that we do not notice the outcasts, the rejects of society, the lost, the forgotten and ignored among us, those trying to fit into our society but are excluded by rules – unwritten rules which are enforced, nonetheless. Today, we may live in a nice, clean society where diseases such as leprosy cannot touch us, in a society that is insulated from such illnesses, in a society that protects us from all that is foreign, different, and unusual or unwanted. Today we may be comfortable living and interacting with those who are similar to us in health, wealth or fortune, with those who share a common ancestry, language, or culture. In time, some of us may be called upon to visit or even to minister to an invalid spouse or parent, and I’m sure most of us would gladly, quietly and lovingly take care of such friends and relatives. However, when the person in need is not a relative, is different from us in some manner, are we so eager, quick and ready to take care of that person? In recent years I have had my eyes opened to the plight of some of my neighbors. When I look around Greenlawn I ask when did we last knock on the door of a nearby home, only to see mattresses on the hall floor and no furniture in sight? When did we last visit an aging parishioner, only to hear him or her say that they don’t know why they are still alive, that there’s no purpose to their life? When did we last talk to a young person contemplating suicide about the sacredness of life and the life yet to be lived? If we say we don’t know of such cases, then we are admitting we are blind, that we are happy in our isolation. Yes, these situations exist today – not only in New York, not only on Long Island, but even here in Greenlawn. There are many who are outcasts from society, rejected by family and friends, imprisoned physically, mentally or socially, or simply ignored by friends and society because of circumstances, health, age, ethnicity or more. We have testimony to this in the Saint Vincent de Paul society, in Baby Corner in the pastoral Care office, in the annual Handicapped Encounter Christ retreat, in the various parish outreach programs that try to reach the ill, the unwanted and the rejected among us. We tend to remember these at Thanksgiving and at Christmas, but they are constantly with us—seasonal generosity does not keep one alive from year to year. How wonderful it would be, if after extending a loving and welcoming hand to one of

these, that we would help them at mass on Sunday. How wonderful it would be if our generosity, our warmth and our kindness extended genuinely to these people and invited them into our inner circle, into our community of friends, into the warmth of our society, even into our homes. How wonderful it would be if we welcomed them as Christians.

In the office of readings from yesterday's Divine Office in a homily by Blessed Isaac of Stella on the pre-eminence of love, he writes: "Why, my brethren, are we so little concerned with finding opportunities to advance each other's salvation, responding to greater need with greater help and bearing each other's burdens? This is what St Paul advised: *Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ* – or, again, *forbearing each other in love*. For that is most definitely the law of Christ." Blessed Isaac concludes: "Let us have compassion for each other and love the brotherhood we share, bear each other's weaknesses and fight against each other's vices." Whatever religious practice or observance it leads to, any teaching or discipline that fosters a stronger love of God and, through God, of our neighbors, is most acceptable to God for that reason. This love is the reason why things should be or not be, why they should remain the same or be changed. This love should be the reason why things are and the end to which all things are directed. For nothing can be considered wrong that is truly directed towards and according to that love. Without such love we cannot be pleasing to God, and without it we cannot achieve anything at all.

How wonderful it would be if we acted like Christians and, like Christ, welcomed our fellow brethren, and loved them as children of God.

I truly believe that such love would be very pleasing to God.