

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46

The book of Leviticus was written primarily for the priests of Israel, the Levites. It draws together various bodies of law and ritual, starting with the laws concerning the Levites themselves; and in fact this book becomes a manual for conducting the liturgy. Catholic exegetes admit the Mosaic authorship of this book, although they also allow that later additions may have been made.

The book starts in the second year of the exodus, after the sin of the golden calf and the institution of the Levitical priesthood (Exodus 32:29). Moses knew that the use of sacrifices is something which is deeply rooted in the customs of many different peoples; possibly as a result of being descended from our common ancestors, Adam and Eve. What is unique about the sacrifices of Leviticus is that blood sacrifices are required; something which had not been necessary prior to the golden calf. Now, when one wishes to approach God, in addition to whatever cereal sacrifices may be offered, a blood sacrifice is also required. Because the Israelites had violated the first commandment and worshiped a god in the form of an animal, animals must now be sacrificed to show that they reject these false gods and recognize God's supremacy.

Along with the need for sacrifice came the concept of ritual uncleanness. Such uncleanness is a familiar concept in the East. (The "Untouchables" of India are an example). For the Hebrews, such ritual uncleanness seems to have had little to do with physical or moral uncleanness but was calculated to keep the People of God conscious of their election as a pure and undefiled people of spiritual qualities and destiny. The obedience and observance enjoined by the Law kept the people conscious of their obligations of purity of life and also made them have a greater awe for God and the religion requiring such purity of its worshipers. Ritual cleanness was demanded for almost any communion with God in the ceremonies of the Temple or the home. The leper was an object of much legislation as regards cleanness (Leviticus 13:14). It seems that the leper was thought to have been touched in a particularly direct way by the hand of God.

13:1 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron,

Aaron is Moses' older brother, the one who is Moses' spokesman (Exodus 4:14-15), and also the one who forged the golden calf while Moses was on the top of Mount Sinai. While Moses was on Mount Sinai, the people had convinced Aaron to represent them in their worship (the golden calf); now that Moses has returned, God has in essence said "You want Aaron, you got him". He is the high priest in the post-golden calf time and must sacrifice a bull every time he enters the holy of holies, thus rejecting the bull idol which he had made.

² "If someone has on his skin a scab or pustule or blotch which appears to be the sore of leprosy, he shall be brought to Aaron, the priest, or to one of the priests among his descendants. ⁴⁴ [If] the man is leprous and unclean, and the priest shall declare him unclean by reason of the sore on his head.

There are many skin diseases which can manifest these appearances, not just what we call today Hansen's disease. The fact that people suffering from these diseases are unsightly was sufficient reason to declare them unclean. Ordinary skin blotches, scabs resulting from boils or burns, scalp disorders, face eruptions, and baldness were not signs of impurity so long as they were devoid of infectious symptoms. It was widely held that leprosy was a punishment for some sin (Numbers 12:1-10; Isaiah 53:4).

⁴⁵ "The one who bears the sore of leprosy shall keep his garments rent and his head bare, and shall muffle his beard; he shall cry out, 'Unclean, unclean!' ⁴⁶ As long as the sore is on him he shall declare himself unclean, since he is in fact unclean. He shall dwell apart, making his abode outside the camp.

Leprosy is an infectious disease and every effort had to be made to keep it from spreading. Lepers were impure and they transferred impurity to whatever and whoever touched them and to the places they entered. Life was very different for a person with leprosy. They had to live in settlements or camps away from towns. When traveling about, they had to warn people they were coming by shouting to show they were unclean; they wore their clothes torn and hair uncombed; all this was meant to make them stand out, so that people could avoid them easily.

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1

Saint Paul has been answering questions which the Corinthian Christians have posed to him concerning what is proper behavior and attitude. After all, they are among the minority in their town, they are surrounded by pagan believers and want to know what is permissible action. For example, is it allowed to eat meat which has been sacrificed to idols since they do not believe that the idols have any power? This is the question which we looked at last week. Today we hear Saint Paul sum up his teaching on Christian behavior.

³¹ So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. ³² Avoid giving offense, whether to Jews or Greeks or the church of God,

In everything a Christian does they should seek the glory of God by always acting with the best of intentions. Each person is morally responsible not only for their own actions, but also for the influence their behavior has on the good or bad actions of others.

“Let all the things which you undertake and accomplish have this root and foundation, namely, that they tend to the glory of God. ... When Paul said ‘whatever you do’, he has enclosed our whole existence in a single word, desiring that we never perform any act of virtue with an eye to human glory.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 388), *Baptismal Catecheses* 6,10]

³³ just as I try to please everyone in every way, not seeking my own benefit but that of the many, that they may be saved. ^{11:1} Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

In imitating the apostle, the faithful will be imitating Christ who is the perfect example of

renunciation for the salvation of mankind.

“If you imitate Paul as he imitated Christ, then you will be imitating Christ as he represented God.”
[Saint Clement of Alexandria (after A.D. 202), *Stromateis* 2,136,5]

Gospel - Mark 1:40-45

Last week we heard the close of Jesus’ ministry on the Sabbath in Capernaum. He had taught in the synagogue and cast a spirit out of a man there; he had then gone to Simon’s home and healed his mother-in-law; then, after sundown (the beginning of a new day in the Jewish reckoning of time) has healed many sick and possessed. The location of the healing which we hear about today is uncertain; all we know is that it takes some place in the region of Galilee.

⁴⁰ A leper came to him

This miracle illustrates Jesus’ power to save even those excluded from Israel by the Mosaic Law.

(and kneeling down) begged him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean."

Prostrating himself before Jesus as a sign of humility and shame.

⁴¹ Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him,

“And why did He touch him, since the Law forbade the touching of a leper? He touched him to show that ‘all things are clean to the clean’ (Titus 1:15). Because the filth that is in one person does not adhere to others, nor does external uncleanness defile the clean of heart. So He touches him in his untouchability, that He might instruct us in humility; that He might teach us that we should despise no one, or abhor them or regard them as pitiable, because of some wound on their body or some blemish for which they might be called to render an account.” [Origen (ca. A.D. 245), *The Healing Of The Leper*]

and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." ⁴² The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean.

The disappearance of leprosy was regarded as one of the blessings of the messianic times (Isaiah 35:8).

“If He cleansed him merely by willing it and by speaking it, why did He also add the touch of His hand? For no other reason, it seems to me, than that He might signify by this that He is not under the hand of the Law, but the Law is in His hands. . . He touched the leper to signify that He heals not as servant but as Lord.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 370), *Homilies on The Gospel of Matthew* 25,2]

⁴³ Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. ⁴⁴ Then he said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what

Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them."

Leviticus 14:1-32 gives the procedures which the priest and the cured must follow in order to be declared clean. Sacrifices and inspections are made and on the 8th day the person is declared clean. This is seen as a precursor to the resurrection when all mankind was given the opportunity to become clean through the offering of Jesus, our high priest.

⁴⁵ The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter.

Saint Mark is making a subtle catechetical point: those cleansed by Christ in baptism must proclaim the Good News.

He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

Like the leper, we are to approach Jesus in humility and shame because we have allowed sin to stain our baptismal garment. Shame should not prevent us from confessing; the leper showed Jesus his sores and begged to be healed. Likewise, we must approach Jesus in the sacrament of reconciliation by putting aside our pride, confessing our sins, and experiencing His healing.