

Jesus Heals the Leprosy of Sin

(Placed in the prayers of St. Pelagia)

Beloved in Jesus Christ,

We see in the gospel today, that Our Lord encounters this man with leprosy.

In those days, leprosy was a horrible disease, the worst.ⁱ

E. G. Masterman writes: 'No other disease reduces a human being to so hideous a wreck,' as leprosy.ⁱⁱ

It might begin with little nodules which go on to ulcerate;

the eyebrows fall out; the eyes become staring;

the voice becomes hoarse and the breath wheezes.

Eventually the person is covered with sores.

A different version of the disease could start with a numbness in part of the body;

failing nerves cause tendons to contract until the hands are like claws.

The loss of fingers or toes, until the whole hand or foot falls off. It could last from 9 to 30 years.

The historian Josephus tells us that lepers were treated 'as if they were, in effect, dead men.'

Once diagnosed, the leper was banished from society. Lev 13

This all may sound cruel, but we must remember that this horrific disease could easily spread through the whole town;

people were terrified of getting it.

Even in the middle ages, the only way to protect a community was to send the leper to a leprosarium.

If a leper so much as put his head into someone's house, that house became unclean.

In the synagogues there was provided for the leper a little isolated chamber, 10 feet high and 6 feet wide called the Mechitsah.

William Barclay says, never has there been any disease which so separated a man from his fellow-men, as leprosy did.

And this was the man who Jesus touched.

To a Jew, there would be no more amazing sentence in the New Testament, than the simple statement:

'Jesus put forth his hand and touched the leper.'

Friends, that leper in the scriptures - is us.

The diseased and the sick and the disfigured who come to Christ, these are really figures and images, of our soul sickened by sin.

When Our Lord tells his disciples to go forth and heal the sick - this is really emblematic of the other statement he made to them:

'Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them.'

For the saved, our bodies will all be healed in the resurrection, no more sickness.

But the disease that the Lord is most concerned about healing, is that which destroys the image of God in man, that which might prevent us from REACHING the resurrection.

'Do not fear the one who can destroy the body, rather, fear the one who can cast body and soul into hell.'

We may sometimes be tempted to think:

'I've confessed my sins, I'm in the state of grace, all is well.'

Well, this IS a comfort, to feel that we are in the state of grace.

But a few things about this -

Firstly, we cannot have metaphysical certitude as to the state of our soul.

We can feel confident that we are in the state of grace, but we do not know the state of our soul for sure.

For example, we meet people who are clearly living in sin, who say, 'Oh, i'm a good person.' They don't know their soul.

It always makes me a bit uncomfortable, when a person goes to confession and begins by saying, 'Father, I don't have any mortal sins, but... and then they tell their other sins.

We don't know our own self that sure.

But beyond this, presuming we are in the state of grace,
the effects of our sins are there.
We are so many lepers and paralytics and cripples.
Sin has left in its wake a critical spirit toward others,
a harder heart, a tendency to untruth, laziness, pride,
cowardice, fear to evangelize our neighbor, lack of charity, egoism....
by sin, our soul has been, in so many ways disfigured;
the image of God disfigured in us -

St. John Vianney was a holy man;
yet he constantly lamented his sins;
he longed to retire to a monastery as he says, 'to weep over my sins.'

Our attitude should be more like that of the centurion in the gospel who
pleased Jesus so much. It was his attitude of humility;
we repeat his words before Holy Communion:
'Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof, but only say the
word and my soul shall be healed.'
Jesus has come to heal our souls, and we ALWAYS need healing.

In ancient Palestine, people often made pilgrimages to some shrine or to some holy
person, in search of healing.
Men, women, and children would flock in the hundreds to some place, walking for days
or even weeks.
Poor people, they saved a few coins to spend on the foods provided by
vendors, and at the shrine for their devotions.
The poorest of the poor; illiterate, mostly country people.

Father Goodier in his book,ⁱⁱⁱ tells us, poverty in the East was full of diseases,
deformities, and maladies of every kind.
Almost no medical aid; no hospitals as we know them.
Cripples crawling about however they could;
fever on every roadside, smallpox infecting thousands, plague

So when Jesus begins his public life, and he is so easily healing people, their
one desire was to be near him, to find relief.

They push and shove, and crowd the Lord everywhere he goes.
Pulling on his clothes, the demented lie down on the road, blocking his way,
foaming at the mouth.

Friends, these descriptions of the so-many sick;
the description of the cure of the leper today -
these are written down by St. Matthew.
But, it is not the miracles that impressed Matthew;
he describes only a few of them.

Rather, he who was once a scheming tax-collector -
he could not forget the day, that this hopeless sinner
was called by Jesus to follow him.

Lord, have mercy on us.
Help me, help a sinner who wishes to love you.
May the Blessed Virgin, pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

ⁱ This summary of leprosy follows that given by William Barclay, Gospel of Matthew.

ⁱⁱ Hygiene and disease in modern and biblical times, E. W G. Masterman

ⁱⁱⁱ The Public Life of Jesus Christ, Vol I, p. 210-212