

## Homily For 6th Sunday

All three readings today contain the Christian teaching on the need for social acceptance even when people are different from us. They also tell us that it is purity or holiness of soul coming from God that cleanses our lives. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Leviticus is known by its first word, Vayikra (וַיִּקְרָא), meaning "and he called". The word Vayikra means that God called Moses and His chosen people to holiness and purity. That is why the first reading teaches the theme of freedom from bodily and ritual impurity as a sign of internal holiness. This freedom is symbolized by the precautions against contracting leprosy given in the first reading and the healing of the leper described in the Gospel. The first reading shows the ancient Jewish attitude toward leprosy and the rules for segregating lepers. This provides a background for Jesus' healing of a leper. In today's Responsorial Psalm (Ps 32), the psalmist exhorts us to rejoice in the Lord because He purifies us from our sins: "I confessed my faults to the LORD, and You took away my guilt." The psalm serves as a mini-treatise on reconciliation, covering the meaning of the spiritual leprosy of sin and showing how we are forgiven by a sacramental encounter with God. "I turn to You, Lord, in times of trouble, and You fill me with the joy of salvation." In today's second reading, St. Paul exhorts us to testify to our healing from the leprosy of sin by living changed lives, expressed in our doing "everything for the glory of God" and for the salvation of others. Today's Gospel describes how Jesus heals a leper, liberating him both from the disease of leprosy and from the unjust and inhuman social isolation and ostracism to which the lepers were subjected.

*A pastor had a dread of getting leprosy. He had read that the early signs are loss of feeling in the limbs, and was always pinching his legs, and if it hurts, he was reassured. On one occasion at a dinner with the parishioners he reached under the table and pinched his leg. He couldn't feel a thing. He pinched it again - harder this time. Still no sensation. The pastor visibly blanched and blurted out, "Oh, no! I've got leprosy!" A young lady sitting next to him asked: "But how do you know?" "Well, one of the early signs is loss of feeling in the leg. I've just pinched my leg twice and I didn't feel a thing!" The young lady remarked, "It was my leg you were pinching, pastor."*

We live in a world of suffering: suffering caused by diseases, suffering caused by the exclusion of people, suffering caused by greed and jealousy. But rather than just say that is 'the lot of humanity' we look towards Jesus as the one who brings healing, who welcomes people into his embrace, and who proclaims a new way of living. To belong to this community is to recognise the mystery of God's forgiveness and healing made visible to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. To the ancient, the world seemed to be divided into two opposing spheres: one occupied by the forces of life, the other in the hands of the powers of death. To the first, God and the pure people belonged, to the second all pagan gods and all that recalled sin. The lepers, who carried in their bodies the hideous marks of death, were the symbol of impurity and rejection by the Lord. The Israelites thought so; their spiritual leaders have categorized people into clean and unclean, just and sinners. But does God accept this discrimination? And when it is done, on which side is God? The Gospel accounts of Jesus' encounters with the lepers go far beyond the biographical chronicle. They are a message in place of God's choices: he approaches the impure and caresses them, because none of his creatures is impure, much less his children. Jesus chose the marginalized, those who were rejected by all; for this reason, he became impure himself, was expelled from the camp and put to death out of the holy city, in an unclean place. Now we know on which side God is. To internalize the message, we repeat: "I disgust sin, but if I refuse the sinner, I walk away from God." The Christian cannot do everything that is in his own right because brotherly love also sometimes requires the renunciation of one's rights. We might interact with someone for the first and only time today, and our actions and attitudes might influence them to decide for or against the Lord. The great baseball player, Joe DiMaggio, was once asked why he played so hard, even in meaningless games. He replied: "There might be a boy in the stands who may only see me play this one time. He deserves to see my best, so I always give my best." How much more must we, who serve Almighty God, do

our very best at all times, for the glory of God is at stake! Can we do our best? Jesus, healer of souls, heal what keeps me from loving like you.