

Homily for the 6th Sunday of the Year 2021

There was one building at Ushaw College, the seminary where I prepared for ordained ministry, which nobody wanted to enter. It was the isolation hospital a good distance from the main block of buildings. There will be people celebrating this Mass who have themselves, or who know people who have spent time in such hospitals, either as children or adults. The very word, isolation, in this context sends a shiver down the spine. There were no hospitals when the book of Leviticus was written, but there were laws which kept anyone suffering from a serious skin disease, such as leprosy, isolated from the rest of the community. Not only are they outsiders, they are to warn people to avoid them by publicly declaring themselves to be unclean. How humiliating!

These legal requirements were still in operation in Jesus' day which makes the incident in today's gospel passage all the more extraordinary. Both the leper and Jesus were pushing boundaries, the leper by approaching Jesus; Jesus by touching the leper. This meeting should never have taken place and by touching the leper Jesus would have been regarded as ritually impure and arguably leprous himself. But that didn't happen. Jesus responded to the leper's great faith and cured him. Our translation says Jesus felt sorry for him, but the real sense is Jesus feeling for him in the 'depth of his guts', possibly even outraged at the treatment people suffering from this disease, received. There then follows what to most of us seems like an impossible demand, namely not to tell anyone that he was cured, but simply to go through the proper channels of restoration to life in the community by being declared healed by the priest. Not a chance, he told everyone, and as a result Jesus is now the one who is isolated, having, as the gospel tells us, to 'stay outside in places where nobody lived'.

This short passage raises the question of who in our world today are isolated, excluded, shunned? When AIDS first became known, people suffering from AIDS were treated as outcasts. Then we might think of those who flee from their own countries because of violence, torture, injustice. Or, those, who are kept out of sight, individuals as recently in Myanmar, or whole ethnic groups as in China, by oppressive or military regimes. There are people excluded by other family members because of their religion or sexual orientation. Those who care for people with memory loss say that their so called friends don't call round to see them anymore. Some people feel excluded from, or indeed by, the Church because they have been divorced and remarried. Many women, rightly, feel excluded from leadership roles in the Church, despite Pope Francis' recent appointment of two women to posts previously only held by men. Children excluded from school because of behavioural issues. The list could go on.

At the heart of the gospel passage is inclusion through healing and a willingness to push boundaries. Jesus refused to be tied to a religious system which put laws and customs before people. The gospel Jesus proclaimed is people, not law, centred, and their well being is at the heart of his ministry. If, as St Paul invites us in the 2nd reading, we are to imitate Christ, people's well being will also be at the centre of our ministry.

Bidding Prayers for the 6th Sunday of the Year 2021

Celebrant:

We have listened to God's Word and proclaimed our faith, and now, with humility and confidence we pray for some of our many needs.

Reader:

For the Church – that through the sacraments of Anointing the Sick and Reconciliation, the Church will continue Christ's healing mission in the world.

Lord in your mercy

For the outcasts of our society, especially those who are shunned because of religious practice or sexual orientation and those cut off by family and former friends – that they will experience the healing presence of Christ and be reintegrated into the community.

Lord in your mercy

For the prophets of our own day who call our attention to the injustice so many suffer throughout the world – that their message will not only be heard but acted upon by those with the authority to bring about change.

Lord in your mercy

For the sick, especially those with terminal diseases, or with memory issues – that they and those who look after them will receive the support and care they need.

Lord in your mercy

For those who have died, all victims of violence, accident, natural disaster and the current pandemic, and for Bishop William Gordon Wheeler, a previous bishop of our diocese, whose anniversary occurs this week – that they and all who have died may rest in peace and rise on glory.

Lord in your mercy

Either aloud or in silence we pray for our own special intentions...pause...then

Lord in your mercy

We ask the prayers of Mary as we say, Hail Mary...

Celebrant:

All loving God, Jesus, your Son, healed the leper and restored him to relationship with others. Turn our attention to those in our midst in most need of your healing and give us the desire to make them one with us again. May the world know the power of your gently care. Through Christ our Lord. Amen