

Reflection on the Gospel–6th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B
(Mark 1:40-45)

-Veronica Lawson RSM

We all seek to be part of family and community because we are social beings who need to engage with others and with our environment. Some are deprived of choice in this respect. Repeated name-calling and labelling is an age-old strategy of exclusion. “Illegals” is a label that excludes some of the most vulnerable people in today’s world. “Leper” is a label that is used metaphorically of those who are not welcome, of those deemed to be “infectious”. Today’s gospel about a person with leprosy invites us to reflect on the pain of exclusion.

To be a leper in the world of early Judaism was to have some sort of skin disease that excluded a person from community and in particular from public worship. There were strict regulations regarding such lepers (see today’s first reading from Leviticus, dating from several centuries before the time of Jesus). Their condition required ritual cleansing by a priest and an offering that cost money. That seems horrifying from our perspective, and it was.

In Mark’s story, the man with leprosy approaches Jesus of Nazareth who is not one of the priests. This afflicted person thus cuts across the established procedures. Jesus is “moved with compassion”, literally “moved in his gut, or in the depths of his being”. In other words, Jesus empathises deeply with the suffering person. He has a physical reaction in the face of suffering. Some manuscripts have “moved with anger”. A later scribe probably considered that expression too harsh as an emotion for Jesus and softened the text.

Jesus speaks and acts. He declares that he wills the cure of the man. He actually reaches out and touches him: a bodily encounter brings healing. He then sends the man back to tell the priests “as a proof to them”. The verb used for “send back” suggests that the priests had already been approached without success. Jesus, the Galilean healer, succeeds in mediating the power of the God of Israel and so restores this outcast person to life in the community and the community itself to greater wholeness through this healing. The widespread report of Jesus’ healing activity will incur the anger of some of the authorities.

For our part, as followers of Jesus, we might reflect on the fact that sickness and disability are not only physical phenomena. They also have social and emotional impacts on individuals and the communities to which they belong. Healing enables people to live again, to be with others and do the things they want to do. It brings new life and integrity to community. Jesus demonstrates that the combination of a compassionate word and a healing touch can work wonders. This was true in the ancient world. It is equally true for us today in the face of a virulent pandemic that has taken so many lives and disrupted family and social engagement. Healing must be all embracing if it is restore life.