

## **The curing of a leper**

The first reading of the Mass tells us about Jewish customs and leprosy. Because it was a contagious disease, the Law declared that lepers were impure and they had to leave society. They lived together and had to show that they were lepers, sounding a bell or shouting “unclean.” Leprosy was seen as a punishment from God. The healing of the disease was regarded as one of the blessings of the coming of the Messiah. More than the physical suffering, the hardest thing was the social exclusion. You can suffer as long as you have people around you. When they were cured they had to present themselves to the priests to certify their healing. Nowadays coronavirus is seen a bit like leprosy. You don’t need to sound a bell, but you must isolate yourself. It is sad that we have left old people die alone.

We are all lepers; we are all sinners. You cannot hide leprosy; it is in your face. Slowly it disfigures your body making it a horrible image of your former self. The same happens with our soul in the state of sin, a much more radical reality, because our soul is the dwelling place of God and it is immortal. If people could see our sins we would go to confession every day, in the same way we look at ourselves into the mirror every morning, have a shower and spend a lot of time and money grooming our bodies. We are ashamed of our sins, but we find difficult to bring them to the priest, to Jesus, to heal them.

In the Gospel we see a leper coming up to Jesus and kneeling down in front of him. It was illegal for him to be there, in a town full of people. He recognised who Jesus was and forced himself to get closer to Jesus even though it was forbidden. He had such a strong desire to be healed that he despised social regulations. We too need that determination; nothing can stop us in our quest to clean our sinful nature. The devil is going to suggest all sort of excuses for us not to go to Jesus.

The leper told Jesus: “If you wish, you can make me clean.” What a great line! With these words the leper won over Jesus. He is telling him that he is there to do his will. We need to learn how to touch Jesus’ heart. The more we know him the better we can get through. Every person has a button that can be pushed to open his or her heart. We learn these lessons in our personal prayer, in our encounter with the Lord.

Jesus moved with pity, stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, “I do will it. Be made clean.” Jesus did the forbidden thing: to touch leprosy. Jesus is ready to touch our wounds. We are ashamed of them, but we should allow Jesus to gently dress them. It reminds me of Saint Francis of Assisi who was very afraid of lepers. Once he came across a leper in the bush who begged him for alms, with what was left of his hand outstretched. Francis was just going to drop a coin, with a disgusting face, but he controlled his feelings, and took his hand and kissed it. The leper disappeared: it was Jesus Christ. When Jesus touched the leper, he was cured immediately. In the Gospel other miracles occur gradually. But here all his limbs were instantly restored. It must have been an amazing scene, a bit magical. He even got back his beautiful blue eyes and could see Jesus’ face, just in front of him, smiling, all the people around them amazed.