

February 15, 2015 Spiritual Leprosy Homily

Dear friends, in the days of my youth as a junior high school student, I was required to read a rather controversial book, "*Black Like Me*", written by a journalist from Texas, John Howard Griffin. The author, an enterprising reporter, had a most novel idea. He disguised himself as a black man, and lived for a time in one of the cities of the segregated South. His book gives a striking account of his experience as one who is the victim of unjust and inhumane discrimination.

To this day, I have a vivid recollection of one especially painful scene in the book. As the author was walking down a Southern street, a white man happened to walk on the same side of the street. By law, the black man was obliged to walk across the street, thereby avoiding contact. He failed to do so. His so-called crime resulted in a severe scolding! In truth, he was being treated as a leper in society.

In biblical times, leprosy, a severe skin disorder, was greatly feared by the people. Invariably, it separated the one afflicted from community and family. Leprosy often resulted in disfigurement, the loss of limbs, and occasional blindness. The leper inspired revulsion! According to the dictates of the Mosaic Law, the leper was obliged to wear torn clothes, have disheveled hair and live apart from society. Worst, of all, he was considered cursed by God and was barred from worship in the temple.

The learned Rabbis of Our Lord's day regarded leprosy as "a living death". Curing leprosy was, according to the teachers of the Law of Moses, as difficult as raising the dead back to life!

There is a shock value to today's gospel reading. A leper approaches Jesus. (Mk.1:40). In doing so, he put Jesus in danger of contamination. Jesus seemed to overcome the fear of contagion! Even more surprising is the reaction the leper provoked in Jesus. Our Lord violates the laws of purity by touching the leper (Mk.1:41). In the eyes of the observant Jew, Jesus made himself unclean by stretching out his hand and touching him. One is reminded of St. Francis of Assisi. Prior to his conversion, in the presence of the leper, Francis would run away. But after his conversion to Christ, Francis not only embraced the leper, he kissed them as well!

What possible lessons can we derive from today's gospel reading? First, we must never look upon a grave illness as the worst of all fates. It always contains the possibility and occasion of an encounter with Christ; Second, The leper's one sentence request, "If you wish, you can heal me!" (Mk.1:40) is a perfect model of Christian prayer. Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus says, "Ask and you shall receive"; Third, the one who is cleansed by Jesus acts like a Christian Evangelist. "He went away and began to publicize the whole matter"(Mk.1:45). He spread the good news about Christ. (Let us ask ourselves: Do we tell others what Jesus has done for us?) And Fourth, Jesus is most concerned about curing our spiritual leprosy, which is our bondage to sin. Do we have the same confidence with which the leper approached Jesus? To the "lepers" of every age Jesus promises freedom, healing and a rightful place in the larger community. Let us rejoice and be glad. Amen!