

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, in our times as in ancient times. 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 man 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 very strict regulations regarding such lepers (see the 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.

In the Markan story, the man with leprosy approaches Jesus 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, and then sends him back to tell the priests “as a proof to them”. The verb used for “send back” presupposes 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 to life in the community. The widespread report of Jesus’ healing activity incurs the anger of some of the authorities, as we shall see in the readings over the next two weeks.

For our part, as followers of Jesus, we might reflect on the fact that sickness and disability are not only physical phenomena. They also affect people emotionally and socially. Healing enables people to live again, to be with others, to do the things they want to do. Jesus demonstrates that the combination of a compassionate word and a healing touch can work wonders. That was true in the ancient world. It is equally true for us today.