

## 6th Ordinary Sunday B

Lev 13:1-2, 44-46

1 Cor 10:31-11:1

Mk 1:40-45

In the 1850's there was a leper colony on the island of Molokai. People who were found with leprosy on the main island of Hawaii were shipped off to Molokai and dumped into the ocean near the island. There was no medicine, or doctors, or shelters – nothing but the hot sun during the day and the cold wind at night. The Catholic Bishop of the Hawaiian Islands knew that there were a few Catholics among the lepers. He asked a young priest named Damien, who was a carpenter before he became a priest, to go to the leper colony and put together a prefabricated chapel that had already been shipped there. Fr. Damien was instructed to have no contacts with lepers, to celebrate no sacraments, and to come away quickly. But what Fr. Damien saw there was so appalling that he decided to stay. A boat came to take him back but he refused to go. He stayed back and took care of those lepers and died like one of them. He was beatified in 1995 and canonized in 2009. On a little hill in Molokai there is a cross with three words from St. Paul's first letter to Corinthians, "Love never fails."

The gospel of today narrates the incident of the healing of the leper. This was an incident that moved people very much and something that was frequently preached by the apostles. So we find this miracle described in detail by three evangelists. At the time of Jesus, leprosy was a dreaded disease that disfigured the victim and brought about great suffering both physically and mentally. As we see in the first reading they were pronounced legally unclean. They had to keep their head uncovered, wear torn clothes, shout "unclean" while walking on roads, and live isolated from the rest of the community. So it is strange to find this man in the gospel in town in the midst of healthy people. Perhaps he had heard about Jesus and was looking forward for a change to meet Him. At last he found Him and he breaks the Mosaic laws to speak to Jesus. Christ was his only hope. He knelt before Jesus and said "If you want to, you can make me clean." That was a powerful prayer. Jesus took pity on him, stretched out his hand and touched him. That was bold. No one ever touched a leper. The Mosaic law prohibited touching a leper. No one ever wanted to even come near a leper. Jesus could have healed him from a distance, but He

decided to stretch out His hand and touch him because he was also a child of God. So, by that action Jesus removed all the barriers that the law and society had imposed, making them untouchables and outcasts. Jesus treated everyone fairly and equally as children of God. How do we treat people today who are of a different culture, nationality, color, AIDS victims, those with same sex attraction, drug addicts, alcoholics, and so on. Are we able to see them as children of God?

St. Francis of Assisi at one time in his life had a terrible fear of lepers. One day when he was out walking he heard the bell that lepers were required to ring in the Middle Ages. Then he saw a leper emerge from the woods. He was horribly disfigured. Instead of giving in to his fears, St. Francis embraced him and kissed him. Francis' life was never the same after that episode. He had found a new relationship with God, a new sensitivity to others and a new energy for his ministry.

As he healed the leper, Jesus wants to heal us of our weaknesses and sins, the leprosy of our souls. Sin is uglier and more loathsome than leprosy and has far more consequences in this life and the world to come. Jesus heals us of that in the sacrament of confession. We only have to go to Him. He is easily available to us. In confession we approach Jesus Christ Himself. Our failures and sins should be an opportunity for us to go to Jesus. The healing of the leprosy of our souls will bring about a new relationship with God, a new sensitivity to others, and a new energy for our ministry.