



Sixth Sunday Ordinary Time 2006.

Leviticus 13: 1-2, 44-46 1Corinthians 10: 31- 11: 1 Mark 1: 40-45

Day two of a typical working day in the life of Jesus, as described by Mark, draws to an end with this passage. Day one had begun with a healing in the synagogue that was connected to the word. Then Jesus had sat down to table hosted by the healed matriarch. The rest of the day was spent with the afflicted.

The second day began with quiet time in the hills Mark says that Jesus was absorbed in prayer. His new companions tracked him down because people were asking for his help. Jesus led his new disciples into the neighbouring villages proclaiming Good News, visiting synagogues and expelling demons. The people of Mark's time understood demons to be anything hostile to God, health and goodness. The expulsion of demons is a good way of describing the restoration of harmony in a very active way.

After describing Jesus' work in general terms, the writer gives an example. As mentioned earlier bible stories are often built in a pattern. Using a pattern is not because of a lack of originality but to place a story in a particular context. The pattern enables the reader or listener to understand how the story "fits" into the structure of the great narrative. The pattern also provides a continuity of message and a kind of authenticating of the story.

A leper approached Jesus, kneeling before him. Leviticus 13 provides us with some understanding of the Jewish response to this disease. There were degrees of leprosy. Skin outbreaks, acne, festering wounds, viral infections were all considered as potential indications of leprosy. The first level of action was quarantine for seven days. Minor ailments would clear up in this time. If after seven days the condition was still apparent and showed no signs of healing it was deemed full leprosy and the person was removed from the community. This was an excellent procedure in the control of infectious diseases.

The word leprosy carried a heavy emotional load. It was a living death. The nature of the leper's skin with its unusual pallor reinforced this image. It condemned the sufferer not only to physical death, but also the huge emotional pain of the loss of relationships, loneliness and grief. A cure from long-term leprosy would be the equivalent of a resurrection.

On hearing the request, Jesus is deeply moved and touches the leper. He says, "I will do it. Be cured." Mark is describing a critical understanding about the communities understanding of Jesus. First, the leper has approached Jesus. He kneels as if before a priest as the law requires. But Jesus is not a priest according to the natural order,

he does not belong to the priestly tribe of Levi. Mark is pointing to a new priestly order, that of messianic high priest.

Second, only God can raise someone from the dead. So this is a statement about Jesus' relationship to God. It is a statement about divinity.

The third point Mark is making is that the curing of a disease such as leprosy and the raising of the dead were considered to be signs of the dawning of the age of salvation. In a short story Mark has set the scene for the community's theological understanding of who Jesus is and what will be the nature of his ministry.

The last part of the story raises difficulties. Why does Mark suggest that Jesus was uncomfortable about what had happened. Scholars do not agree on the reading of these verses. The first difficulty is around "deeply moved with compassion" this is more accurately "Jesus was deeply angry", no reason is given for the reaction. Secondly copyists have written "stern dismissal" when it is more accurately, "and with a deep groan Jesus dismissed him". Such groaning was often used in stories of exorcism. The final difficulty is Jesus command to say nothing when the leper was obliged to go to the priests to have his cure authenticated. The cure could not be a private act. Mark's use of a secrecy motif may have been to point to the fact that Jesus' healing and his placing of the needs of people above Sabbath rules would be used against him in his trial. Jesus did not seek acclamation for his deeds. One interesting thing that does come out of the story and happens in other places too, is that the best evangelizers are those who have experienced healing themselves.

Patricia Stevenson rsj.