



Homily for the 6th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Cardiff Cathedral

Sunday 14th February 2021

Archbishop George Stack

One of the many casualties of the current COVID pandemic is the lack of human contact. Whether it is in the Care Home, or the COVID ward, or even outside our own personal bubble, we are not allowed to shake hands, or hug or kiss. Touch, that most basic form of human communication, has itself become the object of suspicion as it might spread the disease. If the fear of contagious disease has almost brought our modern world to a halt, how much more terrifying must the disease of leprosy have been in the time of Jesus, and 1300 years before that in the time of Moses and Aaron.

We had a graphic description of the disease of leprosy and its consequences for the sufferer, in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus. I won't describe the symptoms again as many of you have just had your breakfast or maybe preparing for lunch! The leper is unclean. *"As long as the disease lasts he must be unclean; and therefore he must live apart; He must live outside the camp"*. A social outcast. Deprived of human contact. Untouchable.

Imagine the controversy when the leper came to Jesus. He broke all the rules of quarantine and social distancing. He ignored government legislation about living outside the camp. He pleaded on his knees: *"If you want to, you can cure me"*. Jesus broke the rules too. He stretched out his hand and touched him *"Be cured"* he said. Do you remember the

controversy of over thirty years ago when Princess Diana went into an AIDS ward and shook hands without wearing gloves with the patient who was suffering from that frightening disease? Her personal courage, her empathy and her desire to break down barriers of ignorance and fear about contagion were all contained in that gesture. She touched him in every sense of the word.

Apparently, the disease of leprosy attacks the nervous system. It compromises the ability of the body to feel pain. The leper might hit his foot on a stone but be unaware of the problem caused. Infection sets in and the foot falls off. He might accidentally burn himself and feel no pain and the same thing happens to his hand. Feet and hands and faces become deformed. A terrible sight – and smell.

The leper in today's gospel may not have felt physical pain, but could certainly feel the pain of isolation and loneliness "living outside the camp". Perhaps most painful of all was the inability to join his fellow Jews in the synagogue for worship on the Sabbath. That is why in the time of Moses he had to go to Aaron the priest to be formally excluded. Jesus contradicted this isolation when he said, *"Go and show yourself to the priest and make the offering for your healing prescribed by Moses as evidence of your recovery"*. You can once more take your place in the community of faith.

Another casualty of the COVID pandemic is the limitation of public worship. Some churches are closed altogether. In all the others, we must sit two metres apart. The handshake at the sign of peace must be a respectful bow. No touching! Many people have said how grateful they are that they can “watch Mass” in their homes. I prefer the traditional Catholic word in which we speak about “assisting” at Mass. Being together, in communion with God and with each other, is what “re-members” puts back together the Body of Christ in this time, in this place, in this parish, in this church. Perhaps the words of Jesus will have a special resonance for us at that time. *“Go and show yourself to the priest”*. Already many people are suffering from the consequences of imposed isolation and loneliness, sometimes even “living outside the camp”. What a privilege we will have once again to be able to “come together” in the House of the Lord to worship God not merely in our own way but by sharing in the perfect worship offered by Jesus Christ his Son. We call it Holy Communion.

“I rejoiced when I heard them say: Let us go to God’s House. And now our feet are standing within your gates O Jerusalem”.
