

Leprosy in the Bible 2-15-15 Lindsay

A few weeks ago, at the priest's retreat Father John Pacheco told a story about something that happened after he said Mass the previous week. A little girl ran out of the back of the church. She was about 3 or 4 years old. She ran to Father John and wanted to give him a hug. So he picked her up and she gave his neck a big hug. Then she looked at him and said, 'My momma says I have a hundred and one degree temperature.'

I tried to find some deep theological significance to this story, but there really wasn't one. These days we differentiate between illnesses that are contagious and not contagious, between illnesses that we can catch from someone and illnesses we can't. The recent Ebola virus scare illustrates the difference. It was unfortunate but necessary to take extreme measures to isolate people with that virus because of how virulent it was and how deadly it was. It was rather a throwback to old Bible times when people had no idea of microbes and germs and how diseases are spread and so there is panic and hysteria.

When we read in the Bible about 'leprosy' we must remember that 'leprosy' didn't necessarily mean Hansen's Disease, the terrible disease we associate with the word 'leprosy' today. In Moses' and Jesus' day 'leprosy' was a general term for any repulsive scaly skin disease. It could even be psoriasis

or just dry skin rash. But people were frightened of any manifestation of skin disease because they didn't understand it and for all they knew it could lead to something worse. Also, there was the idea that disease was given to people to punish them for their sins or for their parent's sin. So, people were shunned.

Our understanding of sin has changed through the centuries. God does not afflict people with disease to punish them. The earthly punishment for sin is in the consequences of the sin itself. And it can also seem that the sinner got away with the sin if there are seemingly no cost for a given sin. We can be fooled into thinking that if someone does something crooked or mean to us and there aren't immediate negative consequences then that means they got off scot free. And this can lead to bitterness and the desire for revenge. And the desire for revenge is an insult to God because the person seeking the revenge is saying in effect, 'God won't rectify this situation, so I have to.' And of course, that is a sin in and of itself. The sin of pride that indicates that the person seeking the revenge thinks he has a better handle on the situation than Almighty God does.

The season of Lent is, of course a penitential season. It is a time to take stock, to get serious about how we can improve our lives; to see where we have gone wrong and seek to get right with God. We fast during Lent.

Traditionally we give up something we like during Lent. So, it is natural to see Lent as the season of deprivation, of sackcloth and ashes, of doing without. I would like you to consider Lent in a different light. Lent could (and should) be seen as a season of healing. When we go to confession, when we confront our short-comings, when we repent and ask God's forgiveness, what is that if not healing? Sin usually is an interior matter, a matter of the heart and soul.

Jesus told us in last Wednesday's gospel: "Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile." Our relationship with God is an interior matter, that's what needs healing: our hearts and our souls. When we give up something for Lent the significance isn't in the abstaining. If you successfully accomplish some act of abstinence during Lent, it doesn't mean anything if it doesn't draw you closer to God. Let's say someone gives up smoking during Lent. What good is it if the withdrawal makes everyone around that person miserable? Obviously, a person growing ever more grumpy is not drawing closer to God.

Have you noticed in our gospel readings lately Jesus always commands the person He has just healed to not tell anyone? He said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." This is called the Messianic Secret motif. It appears in all the gospels, but is especially prevalent in Mark. Why does Jesus insist that everyone keep secret who He or

what He has done? This has caused great consternation among scholars and theologians through the years as they puzzle over why Jesus did this. They look for some really deep significance: did Jesus not know He was the Christ? Did He think He wasn't the Christ until later? And so forth. One theory is that Jesus didn't want people to know so that He could move around easier without the huge crowds. That's the simplest explanation and probably the true explanation.

Lent is truly an opportunity. Not an opportunity to be gloomy and downcast, but an opportunity to heal and to grow. Growing in understanding of what a correct relationship with God looks like and feels like. Growing in an understanding that God is infinite and we are not. Growing in the sense that a complete understanding of who and what God is is impossible. But part of a more mature understanding of a correct relationship with God is realizing that not being ever to fully comprehend who and what God is is not a curse or a deprivation, but a blessing. It is a blessing because we will always grow in our understanding of God, now and through Eternity.