

# A REFLECTION ON THE READINGS FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Leviticus 13:1-2; 44-46; Mark 1:40-45

“We need you to isolate”. Many have heard these words over the last few weeks and months. They do not encourage. We are aware of their importance as we strive to keep social contact to an absolute minimum. Humanity is struggling to contain the Coronavirus. Isolation is a key weapon in our armoury. Yet, I know from bitter experience just how corrosive and destructive isolation can be. Little consideration has been given to the long-term consequences on the mental health of so many people as they struggle with the pain of isolation. Isolation is not a good idea. When I was well into the spiral of despair that marked my years of addiction, isolation became a type of ‘comfort blanket’. Saturday evenings would always see me alone in my room with bottles of wine and gin as my only company. I’d prepare a meal, usually involving steak, chips and a hint of salad. It was my pretence at a healthy diet, but food took only secondary place to the bottles that I thought of as my true friends. Isolation allowed my behaviour to go unchecked. My alone-ness ensured that there was no-one to challenge me, to castigate me, to cajole me. My isolation was unhealthy because it was eating my soul from within like some sort of necrotising bacteria.

In this weekend’s Gospel we encounter a man who had been forced to isolate because of his leprosy and then following the encounter Jesus, too, is forced to isolate. He had been spotted by some sort of biblical Dido Harding. You have been in contact with a leper – you must isolate! Mark tells us: *Jesus could no longer go into any town but had to stay outside in places where nobody lived.* Not only had he conversed with the leper he had also ‘touched’ him. Thus, he rendered himself unclean and the harsh treatment towards Jesus was stipulated in the Law and is reflected in the reading from the Book of Leviticus: *he must live outside the camp.* I recently watched the Channel 4 drama “It’s a Sin” and was reminded of how we all struggled to cope when the AIDS virus first appeared on the scene. We didn’t understand enough about its transmission and fear of contagion rendered many onlookers scared and ineffective. It took the late Princess Diana to bring a sense of realism when she shook hands with AIDS sufferers and declined to wear gloves as she did so. Such a simple, human act that miraculously transformed and redeemed the isolation.

Isolation is not good for any of us, unless we have been called by God to a life of contemplation. From time immemorial ‘solitary confinement’ has been used as a punishment precisely because it dehumanises. In today’s Gospel Jesus says to the leper ‘*Of course I want to – be cured.*’ Mark has already told his readers: *Feeling sorry for him, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.* In so doing he ensures that the man no longer needs to live in isolation – ‘*go and show yourself to the priest*’ – but the price paid by Jesus was that of his own ostracisation. The one is made whole while the other is cast out. When we look at the episode, we see a little pointer to the ultimate destiny of Jesus Christ. He will be called upon to make a bigger sacrifice than that of ostracization, He will pay with his life, the ultimate sacrifice. Let us look again (if we are old enough, that is) to our own attitudes towards the HIV epidemic and those who live with AIDS, or those who are homeless, those addicts who have no friends, no self-respect, that individual on the edge of our own circle who never quite fits in. You know the one I mean: God, (s)he is such hard work, glass always half-empty going on and on about themselves and never hearing anything that I might have to say.

We all know people who seem to be in a permanent state of isolation. They turn to us, and like the leper in today’s Gospel, plead: “If you want to, you can help me; you can relieve my isolation.” We have a choice to make. Do we help and run the risk of our own ostracisation, becoming stigmatised in the process? “Why did you get involved with them? You knew what would happen. I warned you!”. And then there is our response to racial isolation or the isolation that accompanies religious persecution. So much to do and achieve, so little time at our disposal. A first step is a decision to tear down the emotional barriers that we use in self-defence.

A defensive attitude encourages us to erect silent barriers in our life. We compartmentalise, we create emotional ghettos, we push those who are different over there – and leave them there. This is not the message of this weekend’s Gospel. Jesus Christ is all-inclusive. That is the challenge facing us today.