

VI ORDINARY TIME – February 15th, 2015

AND STRAIGHTWAY THE LEPROSY DEPARTED FROM HIM AND HE WAS MADE CLEAN – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mt 1.40-45

And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “I will; be clean.” And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, and said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.”

But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter.

The good news that Jesus communicates to humanity is that God does not marginalize anyone. It is the religion that divides the people into clean or unclean, worthy or not, but not God. As Peter will say in the Acts of the Apostles, “God has demonstrated to me that no one must be called an outsider or unclean”. And this is the theme that the evangelist Mark presents us with the episode of the leper, in the first chapter. “*And a leper came to him..*” the person is anonymous. And when a person is anonymous in the Gospels it means that the person is representative, that is an individual that everyone can identify himself with, in a similar situation. Leprosy, at that time, was considered a punishment from God for sins and there was no cure.

In all the Old Testament there are only two stories of lepers being healed. One is of Mary the sister of Moses, done by God himself, and the other is Elisha by the hand of a pagan. Therefore only two healings. Leprosy is considered a punishment from God for certain sins, so the lepers do not deserve compassion, they had to live away from the villages, outcasts. There were in fact the living dead and could not come near, nor be approached.

Well, here the leper violates the law. He goes towards Jesus and begs Him on his knees. Begging on the knees, because he did not know Jesus’ reaction. “*...and said to him, «If you will, you can make me clean.»*” He does not ask to be healed, because he knows that leprosy cannot be healed. He asks to be

made clean. In the whole passage the verbs “to cure and to heal” do not appear, but for three times it is always, to be cleansed, purified, which indicates completeness. The verb “to cleanse” means that he wants at least contact with God. He has lost everything, the family, his belongings, friends and also God, he feels a real failure and abandoned.

So, he asks for at least a contact with God, because religion has put him in a desperate situation. He is unclean, the only one that can purify him is God, but, because he is unclean he cannot approach God. Therefore the desperation is total. Jesus’ reaction towards this sinner – is according to the culture of the time who continues to sin violates the law – is of pity. The term “pity” indicates a divine sentiment by which life is given to those that do not have a life.

“..he stretched out his hand..” Here, this expression is a little alarming, because the evangelist takes from the Book of the Exodus, from the list of the ten plagues, where to stretch out a hand is always an act of God or Moses against the enemies of his people, to punish them.

So, not knowing how to finish the episode the reader, the listener asks himself: What does he do, punishes him? Because he is a sinner that continues to break the law. And He touches him. It was not necessary to touch an ill person, a leper. How many times Jesus has cured with only the power of His word? Why does He touch him here? He touches him because it was forbidden.

Then what happens? *“..and said to him, «I will;... »* The will of God is the elimination of every form of marginalization carried out in his name, cancelling definitely for always the category of the unclean. For the Lord the unclean people do not exist *“«I will; be clean. »”* And Jesus touching him, also violates the law and at that moment, ritually and legally, He becomes unclean.

“And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.” For the third time the verb “to cleanse” appears. Did the leper deserve to be healed? No, he actually continued to break the law. The evangelist is presenting the novelty of Jesus: the love of God is not given for the merits of the person – this leper has no merits – but for their needs. And above all the great novelty: it is not true, as the religion teaches, that man must cleanse himself to approach and welcome the Lord, but the contrary is true, welcoming the Lord is what makes man clean.

This is the good news the Jesus brings. But here it seems that Jesus suddenly changes His mood. *“And..”* it is not “warning him”, but, *“..sternly charged him and sent him away at once,”* Why? Actually Jesus should have charged him first, when this sinner had broken the law and had approached Him. Why does He rebuke him now? And above all from where does he sent from? He rebukes him for having believed that God would have excluded him from his love.

And He sends him away from the symbolic place, from the synagogue, the religious institution, which taught this terrible image of a God that threatened, punished and sent away these people from him. This is why Jesus scolds him. How could you have believed that you were abandoned by God, sent away from him? Then He says: *“«See that you say nothing to anyone, »”*, because first he must be aware of what has happened to him, *“ «.. but go, show yourself to the priest»”* Why? *“«..show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded »”* and not God?

Leprosy is a general term indicates other skin and scalp deceases. And of these it is possible to be cured. So, to be able to return to the village, to the family, an examination by a priest to certify the healing, was necessary. And naturally this visit was not free, one must pay three lambs, one if the person was poor.

That means that Jesus invites him to compare two ways of God, the God of the priests, a hateful God, a God that abandons and excludes and the Father of Jesus who gives love freely. In fact Jesus says “*« for a proof.. »*” not “*«to them. »*”, but the original text says “*against them*”. The evangelist refers to the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 31,26. where Moses says: “*«Take this Book of the Law..... that it may be there for a witness against you. »*”, as a violation of the law , of God’s will.

Well the leper understood and does not go to the priests. In fact “*..he went out..*” he left that institution that had made him unclean,”*.. and began to talk freely about it..*”. The evangelist uses the same word used for Jesus’ teaching

“*...and to spread the news,..*”, not what had happened to him but the news, Jesus’ good news. God does not exclude. He does not let people stay away from him, but his love is for everyone. This is the message that the ex-leper testifies about. “*.. so that..*” The message that the leper is giving is that God is not like what the priests have let them believe. He does not discriminate, send away mankind, but offers to all his love. “*.. Jesus could no longer openly enter a town,*”.

Jesus, touching the leper, has also become unclean and therefore cannot enter the town publically, because He must also undergo the formula of cleansing. “*...was out in desolate places,..*” exactly like the leper, in places where the unclean must stay. But, as the leper, at the beginning of the passage“*.. people were coming to him from every quarter.*”

Everyone that felt emarginated, all the people that felt refused and despised, now run to Jesus. It is God that has cleansed the person, he has made him in communion with him. It is this the good news that the people were expecting, especially the most abandoned, emarginated and despised by the religion.