

**Sixth  
Sunday  
in Ordinary  
Time**  
**Year B**



**FIRST READING**  
**Leviticus 13:1–2, 44–46**

**PSALM**  
**Psalm 32:1–2, 5, 11**

**SECOND READING**  
**1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1**

**GOSPEL**  
**Mark 1:40–45**

*Scripture quotations from  
New Revised Standard Version Bible:  
Catholic Edition, © 1989, 1993.  
Used with permission.*

**PRAYER**

**Psalm 32:1–2, 5, 11**

Happy are those  
whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.  
Happy are those to whom the LORD  
imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.  
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, “I will confess  
my transgressions to the LORD,”  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.  
Be glad in the LORD and rejoice,  
O righteous,  
and shout for joy,  
all you upright in heart.

**READING  
THE WORD**

**First Reading**  
**Leviticus 13:1–2, 44–46**

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. He is leprous, he is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him un-

clean; the disease is on his head. The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

**Second Reading**  
**1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1**

Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

**Gospel**  
**Mark 1:40–45**

A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him

away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

**HEARING  
THE WORD**

**“Transcending Boundaries”**

Today’s readings revolve around the theme of transcending boundaries. Human made boundaries are often enslaving and oppressive. God shatters such boundaries of exclusion and isolation by including the excluded and reaching out to them in love and compassion, thus, “re-membering” the forgotten ones.

The book of Leviticus focuses on the theme of holiness. In the OT the concept

of holiness lays emphasis on separation between the sacred and profane. This is seen particularly in the collection of laws found in Lev 11:1 – 15:33 with numerous laws and distinctions regarding clean and unclean, which meant “holy” and “profane” respectively. Today’s first reading is a part of that collection and outlines stringent laws for people with skin diseases, commonly referred to as “leprosy”. At the time, such a condition was a striking example of uncleanness and made a person ritually unclean, unholy.

Leprosy was a dreaded, contagious disease, with an enormous social stigma attached to it. It disfigured the body and led to certain death, as there was no known cure. A leper was “doubly marginalized”, for he suffered not only the physical disease but also complete social isolation. Religiously, the person suffering from leprosy was considered to be under the divine curse. It was assumed that a leper deserved such a horrible affliction because of sins he/she had committed which made him or her religiously unclean, and an outcast excluded from the Israelite covenant community. The leper had no place within the community, and was forced to live outside the city separated from family and friends. If a leper were to enter the city, he had to make his presence known by crying out loudly, “un-

clean, unclean”, so that others would not come into contact with him. There were other specific ways that indicated that one was suffering from leprosy, such as wearing torn clothes and dishevelled hair. Due to such measures and the extreme stigma and isolation, lepers were nothing short of being the “living dead”. However, if the disease receded and the leper was restored to health, the Mosaic Law provided rules to restore him or her to the covenantal community, to “re-member” the formerly excluded person. The rite of re-inclusion was performed by the priest, who had to personally examine the leper and, if the cure was confirmed, declare the leper cured and pure. To be cured of leprosy meant restoration to the community and becoming once again “alive” in the physical, social and religious sense.

Today’s second reading exposes divisions in the Corinthian community due to different approaches to food regulations, especially concerning the food offered to the pagan gods – idols. In ch. 8, Paul attempts to deal with the problem caused by the distinction between ritually clean and unclean foods. Among the congregation there were those called by Paul “strong in faith”. They could consume any food offered to idols with a clear conscience, knowing that no other gods, apart from the one true and liv-

ing God, existed. But there were also those among the Corinthians called “weak in faith” who apparently had a very sensitive conscience and were scandalized by the consumption of such foods. In this context, Paul challenges those “strong in faith” with a firm admonition to seek the good of others and not insist on their own right to eat whatever food they want. He thus sets limits on human freedom for the sake of the good of others and the unity of the community. He also urges “the strong” to follow his example of flexibility and adaptation in order to avoid offending others and thus weakening their Christian commitment. His overriding concern is that no one should be excluded from fellowship because of his or her attitude towards food. Paul urges his readers not to create artificial boundaries based on other people’s practices and limited understanding, but rather to seek their good. He always followed that principle in his ministry, and, therefore, sets this as a pattern and example as well as a radical challenge to his readers.

Today’s Gospel narrates the story of the healing of a leper. Mark’s description of the encounter between the compassionate Jesus and a desperate leper is a perfect example of transcending man-made boundaries, which have no relevance in God’s salvific plan. Jesus not only heals the leper,

but also touches him, thus challenging the prevailing Jewish laws on purity and pollution. Contrary to the expectations of his time, Jesus treats the leper as a person with full human dignity. By his touch, he reinstates the leper into society and the covenantal community.

This compassionate act of healing initiates the return of the leper to his social and religious community. He had been abandoned by his own family, forsaken by the society in which he had grown up and censured by the religious authorities through their stringent legislation. He came to Jesus pleading in words "if you wish, you can make me clean" (v. 40). In his prayer, the leper acknowledged his dependence on Jesus and demonstrated his confidence in Jesus' ability to heal him. In response, Jesus, moved with compassion, immediately and spontaneously stretched out his hand and healed the leper through a direct touch. Despite the religious beliefs of the time, Jesus was not defiled or contaminated by the disease, because no external force could defile or render him unclean. By acting in this way, Jesus demonstrated that human need always takes priority over legal prescriptions. The leper in the story was in desperate need of being restored to a fully human life with normal human interactions. He needed someone to reach out and cross the religious and cultural boundaries. Jesus did

just that, and, to complete the process of reintegration into his Jewish religion, society and family, sent him to the priest to obtain a certificate proving that cleansing had indeed occurred. In his ministry, Jesus, whenever he was faced with a choice between observing the law and responding to human need, always placed the latter above the former, the human need above the letter of the law. Doing so he transcended and crossed the boundaries and restored harmony.

Today's readings invite the believers to overcome unhealthy tendencies of exclusion and isolation. In contrast to the human tendency to divide, the divine choice is one of inclusion that embraces suffering humanity, irrespective of a person's social, religious and economic status. In the light of the first reading, the believer is challenged not to use religion as an instrument of segregation that is based on physical impairment or dreaded diseases. The second reading invites believers to tear down the walls built on their perceptions, and preserve the fellowship of the community by seeking the total good of others by being selfless, even to the point of sacrificing their rights. The story of the leper in the Gospel compels believers to place the needs of human beings above all else and to reach out to them with a generosity of heart that expresses the message of the heal-

ing love of God. One who has this generous heart will be able to echo the words of the psalmist, "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart."

## **LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD**

All ancient societies had specific rules and customs regulating how they were to deal with illnesses. These were aimed at preventing contamination, but also reflected how diseases were understood. Most of these regulations demanded the complete exclusion of the sufferer from the community. The first reading shows that such laws also operated in the Israelite community. For the Israelites, the commonly held view was that a person with leprosy was cursed by God because of his sins. Accordingly, it was right to avoid a person so punished by God.

Fortunately, the Scriptures reveal that the views linking illnesses with God's punishment are misguided and wrong. We know that God in his compassionate and merciful love reaches out to those who are unloved and excluded from the society, and that illnesses are not caused by his anger. This message is particularly applicable to the contemporary situation of those suffering from HIV/AIDS. Like leprosy in the ancient times, this illness has a tremendous social stigma attached to

it. The sufferers are considered to bring shame on the community or family. They are marginalised in schools, places of work and even in churches. In this context, we are reminded by Paul of the need to seek the good of others by taking all the steps necessary for the reintegration of the excluded. We might not find the cure for HIV/AIDS, but we can cure the social and human isolation the disease brings. Just as the lepers in the OT were restored to the community by the action of a priest, we can act as “restorers” of the stigmatized back into the community by renouncing our prejudiced views and taking steps to include the excluded and to re-member the abandoned. Often it is enough to demonstrate our own lack of prejudice and fear by simple acts of association with these isolated persons, to give them the confidence necessary for taking further steps towards social restoration.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus offers us the example of how to transcend man-made boundaries that are not relevant to God’s salvific plan. Jesus did not run away from the leper who was considered unclean. We have to learn from Christ to seek out ways of connecting with those rejected for one reason or another, especially those who are in need of company and a listening ear. We should approach them and make them feel the love of God in their lives. We

are reminded to help others experience the effects of God’s liberating love for them; to help them taste life as a full member of society through our simple loving gestures. This would be perfectly in line with the African saying, “The one who loves an unpleasant person is the one who makes him/her beautiful”. To accomplish this, we have to learn to rise above our unhealthy tendency to create boundaries that cause exclusion and isolation. These boundaries might be created by the wrong use of religion, prejudiced cultural customs, or false and biased beliefs. The Christian vocation includes the call to tear down such the walls of separation by placing the human needs of others above the dividing boundaries.

## PROVERB

*“The one who loves an unpleasant person is the one who makes him/her beautiful.”*

## ACTION

### Self-examination:

When was the last time I reached out to someone who was isolated?

What are my beliefs and attitudes with regard to those affected with HIV/AIDS?

### Response to God:

In the course of this week, I am going to look attentively at the surrounding world and identify and pray for the people who suffer from exclusion.

### Response to your World:

As a group, during our prayer meeting, we shall write down the names of our former friends whom we have excluded from our lives and pray for them. Are there any people in our community who are suffering from exclusion? Let us identify them and come up with some steps to help towards their re-inclusion to our community.

## PRAYER

*Almighty and Eternal God,  
today in the Gospel,  
the hand of your son  
Jesus our Lord  
touched and cleansed the leper.  
May you cleanse us today  
from the sins of exclusion and hate  
we have committed in the past.  
Grant us the courage and wisdom  
to act with openness and mercy  
so that, through us,  
you may restore those in need  
of your healing touch.  
Amen.*