

Points to Help Homily Preparation from a JPIC Perspective

Readings of the 6th Sunday of Ordinary Time - Sunday, February 15, 2009

Lv 13:1-2, 44-46

1 Cor 10:31-11:1

Mk 1:40-45

In Leviticus, fear of leprosy leads the community to defend itself from anyone who has it. The people fear that a leper will make them unclean. Therefore, the community pushes people suffering from this disease to the margins. This is an awful—even if understandable—reaction on the part of the community to protect itself. On the other hand, how often does our society ask how it infects its own people? For instance, how does racism or any cultural prejudice lead us to drive others from our community?

The context of the passage from 1 Corinthians places the listener at the table of the non-believer. The Christian faces the dilemma of eating or refusing to eat meat sacrificed to a false god. Paul acknowledges that one does not necessarily sin by eating, if he or she recognizes that the false gods do not exist. But if someone with less moral understanding knows that the meat has been sacrificed, he or she might be scandalized; that is, led to sin.

Paul seeks to keep the whole community together. This is not simply a matter of never offending anyone. Indeed, there may come a time when, in speaking out for justice, one happens to offend. The key lies not in acting for one's own good alone, but for that of the community and especially for those whose faith is weaker. Concern for the weaker members of the community demonstrates concern for the community as a whole.

(In an interesting note for those inclined to vegetarianism, Paul says that giving up meat might be the appropriate response in some cases.)

In the Gospel, Christ responds to the leper's petition with strong human emotion. The lectionary says "pity." Some translations read "compassion." Some ancient alternative texts read "anger." What do these different readings suggest?

- If Christ is angry, is he angry at the man with leprosy? Is Christ bothered? Does this reflect a cultural repugnance toward people whom we find loathsome? One might also recall St Francis's conversion at the encounter with the leper. Perhaps one could read Christ's anger as directed more toward the social systems that make this man an outcast.
- What does the word "pity" suggest? Some people might find it to be a term of condescension. Nevertheless, it suggests concern.
- Compassion truly suggests the solidarity of "suffering with" the other. In fact, Christ touches the man to heal him and makes himself unclean in the process.

The shift in these emotions (notice the canon's choice of "compassion" or "pity" over "anger") suggests a preference for a loving response. Whatever the source of our anger—be it our repugnance toward the other or be it a more righteous anger at injustice—Christ challenges us to respond in solidarity and compassion. In whatever situation, we might pray that our anger be righteous and our response, compassionate.

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