

The one who bears the sore of leprosy . . . shall cry out, "Unclean, unclean!"

Many may ask why the Church selects leprosy as a topic for consideration on any Sunday at all – as it does today. It's not a pleasant thing to think about even if the term leprosy in the Bible might refer not just to what we call Hansen's Disease (the disfiguring disease that killed St. Damien of Molokai) but to any kind of contagious skin disease back in the days of Moses.

Be that as it may, we are confronted today by Old Testament legislation quarantining such victims and a Gospel story in which Jesus heals one.

Now as with every miracle story in the New Testament there are *two ways* (at least) of reading such a text. *First* – and this is the way it seems people usually read them – you can say, *A miracle! Jesus does the impossible. A fellow is seriously sick one minute; the next he's well again. Jesus is a miracle worker. That's what drew crowds to him; that's what early Christians found in Jesus, believed about him: that he could cure diseases, help lame people walk again, blind see, even people rise from their death beds. What power! The divine physician! He must be heaven sent, our world's redeemer, worthy of our faith in him alone, dispensing his magic touch even today in bread and wine.*

Hang on to that! Faith tells us it's true; something uniquely wonderful came into this world by way of Bethlehem of old. But the wonders worked by Christ range well beyond the simply physical effect of his touch. *Which brings us to another way of reading today's Gospel reading.*

It's seventy years now since the film *Twelve O'Clock High* was first shown. It was about a World War II bombing Group (the 918th) stationed in England and assigned missions to knock out enemy industry. Gregory Peck became its commander. And he assigned one of his Flying Fortresses the title "Leper Colony". Any airman, whatever his rank, who exhibited declining morale, dragged his feet, became haphazard in his performance, griped, chickened out . . . was transferred or segregated to the "Leper Colony" – the plane reserved for misfits. The mere awareness of that would be enough to starch them up to a braver performance if only to fly home again.

So the term leper can be applied to anybody relative to anything. Indeed, how many people, deep down think of themselves as a leper – as of low value, not as pretty as others, not as smart, more vulnerable, a joke among others, zilch – even while they compensate for such low self esteem by thinking themselves really superior to everyone else; so *that's* why they feel so lonely. We each segregate ourselves out of fear of exposure of our limitations. And we send out signals the way ancient lepers did, saying "unclean, steer clear of me, leave me alone!"

So as such a "leper" step into today's Gospel and ask Jesus to snap you out of such isolation, your personal ghetto. How? But trusting him when he dares to touch you regardless of your recoil, touch you in bread and wine and introduce you to a world in which you yourself in your new found faith in Christ and the world and God and yourself can touch others well beyond the surface of their skins.