

A leper came to Jesus and kneeling down begged him and said, “If you wish, you can make me clean” (Mk 1:40). In faith and in prayer, the man with leprosy comes before Jesus begging for help.

Today we know leprosy as Hansen’s disease. In scripture, the term leprosy was much broader and referred to any number of skin diseases or conditions.ⁱ Leviticus Chapter 13 offers practical solutions to diagnose and heal a variety of skin diseases, lesions, and infections. A person with a white blotch of skin may need to quarantine for up to two weeks checking in with the priest each 7 days. “Should the priest, upon examination again on the seventh day, find that the infection is now faded and has not spread on the skin, the priest shall declare the person clean; it was merely a scab. The person shall wash his garments and so become clean” (Lv 13:6). The Book of Leviticus almost reads like a physician’s desk reference detailing all kinds of skin ailments and whether a person should be declared clean or unclean.

In the most severe cases, the leprosy may indeed be Hansen’s disease. There is great concern for the spread of the disease. In the absence of the knowledge of how to cure the disease, the person is isolated from others to prevent the spread of the infection. Crying out “Unclean, unclean!” is meant to insure a safe and effective social distance. In the midst of a pandemic, we cannot help but draw a connection between the leper who is healed by Jesus in today’s Gospel and the worldwide prayer for the millions who are suffering from the coronavirus. What can we learn from Jesus as he responds to the man with a full-blown case of leprosy?

Jesus listens to the man and takes him very seriously. Jesus can relate to the leper and to all the sick. Every day, Jesus encountered the poor, the sick, the sinner, and those who are marginalized by injustice. These people who always came to Jesus in faith found a healer who listened first and reached out to help the whole person. The sick respond to caring and love and we can all learn from Jesus who first takes time to listen.ⁱⁱ

As a child, I recall frequent and painful earaches that required medical help. I would go to my mother and father complaining of a throbbing pain in the middle of the night. The fact that they listened and took me seriously put me at ease and began the healing process before we could get to see a doctor.

Jesus is not indifferent. He sees the whole person. Yes, he is concerned about the leprosy, but he is also concerned about the soul. With his eyes, Jesus gazes into the heart of each person. We may not be able to gaze into the heart but when we encounter another, even a homeless stranger, we can look into their eyes and offer a smile, and an acknowledgement of meeting another person who in all reality is our brother or sister in Christ.

Jesus was moved with pity. “Why does Jesus have these feelings? Because he himself became frail, endured human suffering, and received comfort from his Father. Indeed, only those who personally experience suffering are then able to comfort others. There are so many kinds of grave suffering: incurable and chronic diseases, psychological diseases... and numerous forms of disability.”ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus is the miracle worker, he can offer cures. We as a minimum can respond with care. Exploring our own suffering and brokenness can open a window to being more compassionate to others in their illness.

We are most thankful to those with the specialized knowledge to offer healing through the medical arts ... all healthcare workers from physicians, to nurses, to medical and administrative professionals, including assistants and volunteers. Thanks to their dedication, they can offer healing solutions. When they give of themselves encountering the patients not only with their heads but also with their hearts, they also offer the healing presence of Christ.

Illness affects us spiritually. When we are ill, fear can set in. We may find ourselves powerless and while this can lead us closer to Christ, we may also feel more vulnerable to temptation or despair. Let us draw close to the sick in prayer. Let us remember them by name. Perhaps we may reach out with words of encouragement and support through a card, a letter or a phone call. Let us show our love for Jesus by showing love to those who are frail, infirm, and suffering.

In the midst of the pandemic, it is not so easy to visit the sick. It is difficult for family, friends and even priests to visit. There is a legitimate concern of bringing the virus unknowingly into a hospital where people's health is already compromised. I know of no easy solution. "I turn to you, Lord, in time of trouble, and you fill me with the joy of salvation" (Ps 132:7). Let us turn to the Lord seeking his help for ways in which we can reach out to those we can not immediately embrace.

ⁱ Hahn, Catholic Bible Dictionary, Leprosy.

ⁱⁱ vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/sick/documents/papa-francesco_20200103_giornata-malato.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.