

Year B Sixth Sunday Ordinary Time
Feb. 15, 2009
Lev 13:1-2, 44-46; Ps 32; 1 Cor 10:31-11:1; Mk 1:40-45

The problem with sin is not in the first place that it offends God (although one could look at it that way). The problem with sin is that it causes us to hide and keep away from God, because of shame, and this break in our loving communion with God is what “offends” him, that is, sin frustrates God’s intention in creating, namely, that we live in his presence, enjoying blessed unity with him. Sin brings “exile,” distance and estrangement from God.

Human cultures developed ideas about order and propriety that were always referred to the supernatural, if not the explicitly divine, realm. “Purity,” what constitutes a proper state in which to live in society (which was divinely established), is found across cultures. In Israel, one of the things that made one “impure,” and thus unfit for society and for worshipping God in the temple, was “leprosy,” the name given to many types of skin problems and even mold and mildew on clothes and walls (see Lv 14:54-55).

No one but God could cure “leprosy,” 2 Kgs 5:7. The only thing a Jewish priest could do was verify that someone had somehow already gotten rid of his “leprosy,” Lv 14:3, and then accept and perform the sacrifices that were required for the former leper’s reincorporation into the temple-worshipping community. One of these sacrifices was a lamb, which was offered as an *asham*, sometimes translated “guilt- or sin-offering,” but it really was the all-inclusive reparation sacrifice. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:10 offered his life as an *asham* (see also Rom 8:3).

Jesus touches the leper, heedless to being contaminated, and is able to immediately cure him. The leper had believed that Jesus could do this. Jesus tells him to go to the priest and offer the prescribed sacrifice. But the leper, presumably in Galilee far away from the temple, does not heed Jesus: he is so excited about what has taken place that he begins to preach about Jesus, instead of wanting to return to the temple community (compare Lk 17:11-19). The gospel reader knows that it is Jesus who will give his life as the Servant, Mk 10:45, who overturns the temple tables and chairs which are no longer necessary for sacrifices after his death on the cross (it is then that Jesus literally destroys the old temple and builds a new one in three days, Mk 15:29, 38). This is the implication behind the “proof for them” in Mk 1:44.