

Krijtberg, February 10, 2024. 6th Sunday of the year. Leviticus 12:1-2.45-46,
Mark 1:40-45

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SOMEONE BEING CLEANSED

Isolation

In the first reading, from Leviticus, and in the gospel reading, it is about a serious skin disease. Such a thing was not just any disease, because with such a disease you were an outcast because of the danger of contagion. You were not only expelled from the city, but also from the temple and synagogue, because you were also cultically unclean. In Leviticus we read that such a person was declared unclean by the priest, that he had to tear his clothes, let his hair hang loose and shout *unclean, unclean!* Moreover, people thought that suffering was the result of sins you had committed. The exiled sick man was also thought to be guilty.

Such a person appears in today's gospel. We heard in recent Sundays how sick and possessed people were brought to Jesus by relatives and carers. This happened in full public view, in the synagogue and in the city. But in today's gospel, someone emerges, as it were, out of nowhere, from his social and cultic isolation.

Breaking the isolation

From his isolation, he went to Jesus. He fell on his knees before Jesus and said: *If you wish, you can make me clean.* It is striking that he does not ask to be healed, but emphatically asks to be delivered from his uncleanness so that he can reenter the city and the synagogue. By showing himself in public and by contacting Jesus, he breaks a taboo, he does something that is not allowed under the law. Jesus also does something that is not allowed: he touches the man who had been declared unclean. But because the sick person came to Jesus, and because Jesus reached out his hand and touched the sick person, contact was established. The isolation was broken and the illness disappeared.

Something extraordinary was happening here. Because Jesus was working here as image of God. Jesus shows how God deals with us. Jesus literally says: *be made clean.* Here the 'divine passive form' is used, indicating that God is working here. So it says: be made clean by God. It is God who delivers the man from his isolation.

In the messianic age, the time of the kingdom of God, or God's new world, skin disease has no place. The healing of the unclean person shows that with Jesus, the new, messianic age has arrived. We read in the gospel how John the Baptist sent disciples to Jesus asking whether or not He was the Messiah. Jesus replied: Go and tell *John what you hear and see: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleaned, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them* (Mt 11:4-5). All these healings are images of the fact that God's new reality has penetrated the old world, that we do not have to wait for later, but that God is already at work now.

The outside and the inside

Now it is strange to read that Jesus sent the healed man away with the stern warning not to say anything to anyone. Why did Jesus forbid him to say anything? Because he had to go to the priest first to be cleansed by him, this in accordance with the law. We heard in the first reading that the priest's job was to diagnose the skin disease. But he also had the task of determining the possible cure (Lev. 14:1-32). It is striking how Jesus breaks the taboo of the law on the one hand and is law-abiding on the other.

But there may be another reason for that injunction of silence. Don't just trumpet everywhere that you are better again! For God's activity in this world is a hidden reality. What Jesus does is not television or newspaper news. It is not about the spectacular outside of sensational healings, but about an invisible inside: the working of God's spirit in people. It is not about physical healing, but about the spiritual resurrection of man, who lives from God's forgiveness and who can forgive others from that forgiveness. It is about breaking through to God's new world through silent acts of service.

The story of the gospel is also our story. The reader can identify with the nameless man, who emerges from his isolation and seeks to reconnect himself with the outside world. He does so by breaking unfruitful taboos. And Jesus broke the isolation by touching the man and addressing him. Two met, one asking, the other giving. In this encounter healing took place. When we allow ourselves to be touched by Jesus and his message, when we meet the other person asking and giving, something wonderful can happen: the coming of God's new world, a world of forgiveness, justice and peace.