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Understanding Christ the Divine Physician

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Understanding the Covenant, hour of Jesus

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Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for February 12, 2012 for Cycle B:

Lev 13:1-2, 44-46; Ps 32; 1 Cor 10:31-11:1; Mk 1:40-45

UNDERSTANDING CHRIST THE DIVINE PHYSICIAN

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Along with war and famine, the rumor of contagious disease causes fear to rise in people's hearts. How can a person protect himself and his family from these harbingers of death? In every age we find that the ravages of pestilence stir people to flight, just as war and drought lead families to abandon ancestral lands. Disease, however, is different from the other specters because it can become the occasion for alienation even within the family circle. What courage is shown by those who nurse the sick, who refuse to leave loved ones afflicted by disease! As Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity and other dedicated caregivers know, the human spirit must be enabled to mature even through the most frightening human tragedy. Only a deep faith can triumph over the myriad attacks waged against our common bodily mortality. Nurturing this faith in the suffering and offering solace while caring for their physical needs is a wonderful union of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

The ancient Hebrews tried to protect themselves against the danger of contagious disease by "quarantine" of the afflicted. The priestly Book of Leviticus contains a detailed discussion of skin ailments erroneously identified in English as "leprosy" (Hansen's disease). In contrast to the slow progress of leprosy, these ailments can be observed over a period of a week (Lev. 13:4,5) and are curable, whereas only modern drug therapy has been able to halt Hansen's disease. There are no indications that leprosy was known in the Near East before the time of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE).

The symptoms described in Leviticus may relate to several skin ailments, which would be assessed by the priest to determine if the condition seemed contagious. Those victims judged to be a danger to the community were ostracized and obliged to signify their condition by word and sign. The only social exchange could be with others so afflicted. This situation continued down to the time of Jesus, so the Gospel records an extraordinary aspect of his healing ministry. Although Jesus could heal by a word alone (Mk 1:25; 2:5-12) in this instance, moved with pity (some manuscripts read "with anger"), he touched him. As in other cases, Jesus showed no fear of being unclean as he brought wholeness to the afflicted. This action was not to be interpreted as disregard for the Law of Moses, but constitutes a response to the situations which called for a tangible manifestation of loving compassion, or of indignation at the disorder wrought by disease.

To be integrated into the community again, the man needed a clean bill of health from the priest. The elaborate ritual of purification and sacrifice after the examination by the priest is described in Lev 14:1-32. After washing his garments and shaving his head, the man would bathe before going home. Thus would he signify the new beginning for his life, with its orientation towards the worship of God and service of neighbor. Would he find ways to ease the burdens of others with whom he had shared the anguish of isolation? Do the trials of my life become a basis for a more mature insight into the mystery of suffering in others?

The command of Jesus that the man not speak to anyone before going to the priest seems strange. However, the marvel of his cure required authentication before he could mingle freely with others. Silence was appropriate as one proceeded to express gratitude to God and be restored to communion with the ordinary ways of worship in the Temple and synagogue. Did Jesus also want to avoid the kind of publicity that would lead people to distort his message? Some scholars have discerned in Mark a "Messianic secret" that would explain why Jesus demands silence concerning his actions or identity (see Mk 1:34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26, 30; 9:9). Because there were many theories among Jews concerning the role of the promised Son of David in the divine plan, a superficial assessment of Jesus' identity and work might precipitate false hopes. Only disciples would gradually learn the profound new dimensions that Jesus was giving to the prophetic hints concerning God's redemptive design. At this early stage, however, the concern of Jesus was probably to emphasize his respect for the priests' authority in the land and to keep the priorities of his own mission in order. He had come, not merely to show a humanitarian concern with people in their suffering, but to point out the ways in which the common burden of sin alienated the human race from God and neighbor. Only then would his gifts be appreciated in all their fullness, for time and eternity.

The Gospel indicates that the man approached Jesus with reverence and faith; kneeling in petition he declared that Jesus had the power to heal him. Evidently word has spread quickly from Capernaum where Jesus had reinforced his teaching by curing the demoniac, Simon's mother-in-law and many others. How could this man restrain his joyful knowledge that his life was changed? His faith had been rewarded, so he felt compelled to share the good news, alerting others to the way they could be relieved from their ills.

The Church knows the human need for healing, and for comfort in times of sorrow. Our hospitals and clinics constitute an expression of the ever-present compassion of Jesus for people suffering bodily and spiritual ailments. At the same time, however, we must not neglect to learn how to imitate Christ in his sufferings. Only then will our faith point to the riches of his Paschal Mystery, offering hope to those whose search for health must be completed by belief in life eternal.