

Homily Feb. 15, 2005 Week 6 B

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

While the Gospel of Mark may not have the literary beauty of Luke, or the beautiful Jewish tradition of Matthew or the theological depth of John, Mark's is the most vivid of all the Gospels. He's direct and uses few words. And even though it is the shortest of the four Gospels, Mark had a knack for including a lot more concrete details.

For example, last week Jesus did not just "cure" Peter's mother-in-law, he "grasped her hand, and helped her up." When Jesus stills the storm at sea, he's not just "in the boat," he is "at the stern"; and he is not just asleep, but sleeping "on a cushion."

But when we look even closer at Mark to see the historical context in which this Gospel was written, unlike the other three, we are taken straight into a world inhabited by demons and evil forces with which Jesus is constantly in conflict.

One of those evil forces was of course the Roman Empire. In fact, most scholars now believe that Mark was written in Rome for the purpose of strengthening the faith of those early Christians who were facing terrible persecution.

And then there were the demons and the evil spirits, essentially Satan, that the people of Jesus' day intensely believed ruled the world.

One of the main strategies of Mark's Gospel, then, was to demonstrate two absolute truths: 1. The Emperor of Rome was not the Lord of the Universe. Jesus was. 2. Satan was undeniably strong, but Jesus was the "Stronger One."

From the beginning of Mark's Gospel to the end, Jesus is presented as the Lord of the entire natural world: the wind, the seas, the skies — they are all under his power. He is also

the Lord when it comes to the ability to heal all the diseases and all the illnesses that the world at that time had no answer for, especially leprosy.

Which brings us to today's Gospel story. Leprosy was the most dreaded of all diseases at that time because it separated people from their family and their community, constituting a "living death" for the one afflicted.

So it's really remarkable that the leper, desperate to be healed, does three things forbidden by Jewish law: He approaches Jesus, kneels down in front of him, and begs for him to "make me clean."

The leper actually treats Jesus as someone with divine power — a power much greater than Satan and the emperor combined!

What happens next is one of the most vivid portrayals in all the Gospels of Jesus' humanity joined with his divinity. "Moved with pity," Jesus does three things, also forbidden by the law: He stretches out his hand, touches him, and speaks directly to the leper: "Be made clean."

Jesus demonstrated that he has ultimate power, even over the most feared diseases that no one before has ever been able to conquer. And yet he did so with the greatest sense of compassion and tenderness, and did so for the "least of these," a human outcast.

But Jesus healed more than the man's disease; he also healed his isolation, his loneliness, his despair, his belief that he was cursed by God.

And then Jesus asked him to be silent. He did this for two reasons; one we see in the text, because by not remaining silent the former leper ended up attracting so many people to come to Jesus that he had no freedom of movement and had to stay in secluded places to avoid being overwhelmed.

The other reason is that Jesus wanted to announce that he's the Messiah at a time of his own choosing and only after he had prepared the people to recognize precisely what kind of a Messiah he is going to be.

While Jesus could and did work miracles and perform extraordinary healings that wasn't his main purpose. Ultimately Mark's Jesus wanted to present himself to the people as a suffering servant, a Savior who brings salvation through his death on the Cross. Being known mainly as a healer and miracle worker obscured his essential message.

And still it's good to remember Mark's closing words: "... and people kept coming to him from everywhere."

Because they still do today. And we want to follow Jesus' example. We may not all have the charism of healing, but we all have the gift of being present to those who are suffering.

Walt Whitman wrote, "Seeing a wounded soldier on the battlefield, I do not ask who he is. I become the wounded man." We can do that when Christ is the center of our lives. G.K. Chesterton said one who is Christ-centered instead of self-centered, is a sane person in an insane world.

The bottom line is with deep compassion, each of us are called to stretch out our hands to the disadvantaged, to those we deem unlovable or unforgiveable and touch them, and lead them to a place of hope and healing and forgiveness and perfect freedom.