

LECTIO DIVINA WITH FATHER LAGRANGE

The healing of a leper (47)

<p>Luke 5. ¹²Now there was a man full of leprosy ³ in one of the towns where he was; and when he saw Jesus, he fell prostrate, pleaded with him, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean."</p> <p>¹³Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do will it. Be made clean." And the leprosy left him immediately.</p> <p>¹⁴Then he ordered him not to tell anyone, but "Go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; ⁴ that will be proof for them."</p> <p>¹⁵The report about him spread all the more, and great crowds assembled to listen to him and to be cured of their ailments,</p> <p>¹⁶but he would withdraw to deserted places to pray.</p>	<p>Mark 1. ⁴⁰A leper came to him (and kneeling down) begged him and said,</p> <p>"If you wish, you can make me clean."</p> <p>⁴¹Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean."</p> <p>⁴²The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean.</p> <p>⁴³Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once.</p> <p>⁴⁴Then he said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them."</p> <p>⁴⁵The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.</p>	<p>Matthew 8. ¹When Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him.</p> <p>²And then a leper ² approached, did him homage, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean."</p> <p>³He stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I will do it. Be made clean." His leprosy was cleansed immediately.</p> <p>⁴Then Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one, but go show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them."</p>
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In a place that the evangelists do not name, St. Mark says that it was in a house, a leper came to Jesus. Throwing himself at his feet, he besought him: "If thou wilt, thou canst heal me."

Leprosy is still found in Palestine, especially in Jerusalem. It is always an object of horror, but the Christian charity of certain devoted women who look after the lepers is great enough to overcome their loathing for the disease. In the time of Jesus, however, the chief preoccupation was to isolate the leper from the rest of the community. It is difficult to define precisely the disease that was then called leprosy: the term was wide enough in meaning to include several different kinds of skin disease. It included in any case tubercular leprosy which causes swelling of the joints, and sometimes finger-bones and other parts fall off completely, although this disease, today common in Palestine, is not described in the Bible. There were "leprosy" that were thought to be curable, and the priests alone had the right to

pronounce on the cure, as this disease made unclean, which was regarded as a punishment from God. But true leprosy is incurable, and the only hope of being cleansed from it was by looking for special intervention on the part of God¹. Fear of contagion, repugnance inspired by the disease, the legal uncleanness which tainted the victim, all these reasons had given rise to legislation which banished the leper from contact with his fellowmen; he was compelled to don a funereal garb by which he might easily be recognized, and even commanded to denounce himself to the passer-by with the cry: "Unclean! Unclean!"²

We can understand, then, what was the audacity of this leper who entered an inhabited place, even a house, in order to come near Jesus. He had broken the Law; but he was to be pitied, and moreover his faith was perfect. The Master's first feeling is one of compassion. The leper has appealed to his will: Yes, he does will it. A cleansing is asked of him: he grants it. Furthermore, He adds a gesture that no leper would have dared to look for: He touches the unclean man, and that gesture has become instinctive for heroic souls. It was his right to Him: especially as leprosy disappears at his touch.

After thus giving way to His kindness of heart, Jesus comes to the question of the leper's position before the Law. With a certain show of severity³, he represents to him that he must be gone on the instant for fear of astonishing and scandalizing those who saw him enter. He is cured, but his legal position is not yet secure. The miracle does not dispense him from the obligation of having his cure verified by the priests. From them he must receive a certificate, which he can show to everybody, as a sort of testimonial that he has recovered his rights in society. Then, it will take even offer sacrifice prescribed by Moses for the case⁴. Until all is in order, he must say nothing to anyone. For once readmitted to the company of his fellowmen, he would no longer take the trouble to fulfil his duty.

That, it seems, is just what happened. Doubtless it was a bad case of leprosy which had gone so far that all hope of improvement had been given up. There was a great sensation, therefore, when the man published the news of his instantaneous cure. In the case of fever the cure is gradual as the fever falls; recovery from other diseases depends to some extent on the condition of the patient. But skin diseases are plainly visible and their obstinacy is well known. The miracle, therefore, was plain for everyone to see. And yet Jesus had commanded secrecy. He knew, of course, that his miracles did not remain hidden and that they were exciting the hopes of the populace, but he was determined not to let loose any disturbance about a Messiah. He therefore avoided entering the towns in broad daylight. But this did not endanger his ministry, for now the crowd went to him, even in the deserted countryside.

*In L'Évangile de Jésus Christ par le P. Marie-Joseph Lagrange o.p.
avec la Synopse évangélique*

Transcription www.mj-lagrange.org

¹ 4 Kings v.7.

² Leviticus XIII, 45.

³ For the meaning of ἐμβριμάομαι see Commentary on St. John, p. 304.

⁴ Leviticus XIV, 2-32.