It seems very fitting that we should hear that particular gospel passage today, on this last Ordinary Sunday before we begin our Lenten Pilgrimage towards Easter on Ash Wednesday, later this coming week. It is a very familiar story, the last of the many miraculous healings in c.1 with which Mark begins his Gospel, his story of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. On this weekend’s retreat, we talked much about those who encounter Jesus – the apostles, the Scribes and Pharisees, the demons – and this episode is the first in Mark when we see another of those groups who meet the Lord, and whose lives are changed. During the retreat, I referred to this group as “the desperate people” – those who are so aware of the mess their life is in, be it through sickness, or possession, or through the sickness of those they love – that they are “desperate” enough to come to the Lord and ask his help, desperate enough to come to him and ask for healing.

That is precisely the case in our gospel today. The leper comes to Jesus, kneels before him, and begs to be healed. For the first time in Mark’s Gospel, we actually hear their conversation: “If you want to, you can make clean, says the leper... and Jesus said: Of course I want to; be clean”. That first statement from the leper is very powerful, although our modern translation rather softens it; a better translation would be: If you will it to be so, you can make me clean. The leper is expressing a deep faith; it is as if he was saying – if you choose to, I know you have the power to heal me. It may be that he had heard of the other miracles that Jesus had already done, it may be that he heard of the authority with which he gave his teaching from the people of Capernaum. Whatever lay behind those words he spoke, it was an expression of his deep faith in Jesus’ power, and of his own deep desire to be healed.

And it is no wonder that his desire should be so strong. In today’s first reading, we hear some of the rules by which those with leprosy were forced to live in Ancient Israel: they were to be considered unclean, to warn others away from them with their cry of “Unclean!”’, to dress distinctively so as to be recognisable as lepers, and they were to live apart from others, away from the towns and villages. Those commands originally spring from a good purpose; they were ancient “hygiene codes”, designed to avoid the spread of what can be a highly contagious infection. And yet the price paid for this “hygiene” by the victims of the disease was a high one: almost total social exclusion, no human companionship except with fellow sufferers, and – perhaps worst of all – a total exclusion from public worship, from the Temple and the Synagogue. Even God, it seemed had abandoned them, for they could have no public relationship with him.

And that is one of the reasons why this gospel is so poignant. For in Jesus, we see God made Man, and we see that God has not abandoned them at all. As soon as the leper makes his
petition, we hear Jesus’ response: “Of course I want to: be clean” and he touches him. And that is quite extraordinary. It is extraordinary because there is no trace of hesitancy in Jesus’ answer, but instead an eagerness to reach out. And, in reaching out and touching him – perhaps the first truly human touch this man has felt in many years – the healing is complete. In that simple touch and that healing, that leper, that person, is reconciled with God and with his neighbour. That touch is scarcely an extravagant gesture – we each do the same every day – but it is that simple act of Jesus, that touch, which brings the leper back from the living dead, back into his family, his community, his religion.

But there is one tiny unique detail in Mark’s account which often, I think, gets overlooked; indeed, in all my years, I have never heard anyone preach on it. At the end of the story, Jesus tells the leper to say nothing, but to go and make the offering commanded, in thanksgiving for his cure. But the ex-leper cannot contain his excitement, and so tells everyone what has happened. Mark continues: “so that Jesus could no longer openly enter any town, but was out in the country” (Mk 1:45). The conclusion is obvious, but scandalous. That healing touch, so generously given, had made Jesus himself – at least in the eyes of his contemporaries – into a leper, an outcast, it had made him one of the unclean. That conclusion seems scandalous, it seems to cut right across our image of the Lord, across all the holy pictures and statues we have ever seen – and yet there it is, in Mark’s gospel. Jesus, at least for a while, was seen as a leper.

Yet I think this should not surprise us at all. For I think that in this story, it becomes clear that Jesus’ whole life and mission is consistent. Here, right at the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus – the love and healing of God made visible – makes clear that he will stop at nothing to save the lost, the outcast, will stop at nothing to reconcile Man with God and with his neighbour. And we see the same at the end of the story, when this same Jesus is crucified. On the cross, outside the city in the region of uncleanness, in the region of the dead, Jesus shows again that he will stop at nothing to reconcile Man with God and with his neighbour – not now by taking on himself just the disease of one sick and desperate man, but by taking on himself the sins of the whole world.

I said at the beginning that it was fitting that we should hear this gospel read today. On Wednesday, we begin again the season of Lent, that great season of penitence for sin, that great season of thanksgiving for the reconciliation won for us by Christ through his death and Resurrection. Perhaps then, in these coming days, we may ponder on this story in our hearts, ponder the love and enthusiasm with which Christ waits to reconcile us too to God and to our neighbour, just as he did with the leper, ponder that love with which he offers to take away that sin which leaves us too among the “living dead”. And what do we have to do to receive that healing from the Lord? Well, just like the leper, in our desperation and our weakness, we only need to ask – and, undoubtedly, we too will receive the same answer: Of course I want to: be healed.

14.2.15