



Things to Ponder

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Our Self Portrait (Based on Mark 1:40-45)

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

Today's Gospel (Mark 1:40-45) account of Jesus' cure of the man with leprosy brings to mind the well-known short story of Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Mr. Gray was a handsome, urbane, and worldly young man who, like many of the gentlemen of his era and social class, commissioned an artist to paint his portrait. As the years passed, Dorian himself never aged: not a wrinkle, not a gray hair, not the slightest sag of muscle tone. He looked exactly the same as he did on the day the artist finished his portrait.

But not so his portrait. It not only began to reveal the inevitable signs of physical aging, but depicted as well the deterioration of his heart and moral character. The greed, licentiousness, coldness, vanity and cruelty of his heart distorted and made gruesome his once handsome face. The picture became so grotesque that Dorian was forced to hide it from all view, for the picture was as repulsive to him as it would have been to anyone unfortunate enough to see it.

People who suffered from leprosy were, like the portrait of Dorian Gray, repulsive to others and to themselves. The most common type of leprosy in Jesus' time was what modern medicine would call a combination of two strains of the disease: nodular and anaesthetic leprosy. The onset of the disease is marked by extreme lethargy and joint pain. Nodules form ulcerating sores all over the body that produce a foul-smelling discharge. As the neurological system is attacked, the victim becomes impervious to pain and often injures himself without realizing it. In the 20-to-30-year duration of the disease, the muscles waste away, the ulceration becomes complete and body appendages gradually decay and shrink to mere stubs. The disease ends with mental decay, coma, and death.

Because this disease was extremely contagious, anyone who had the slightest sign of leprosy was excluded from all community life, as we hear in our first reading from Leviticus (13:1-2, 44-46). Lepers had to wear distinctive clothing and announce their uncleanness whenever someone drew near. In the Middle Ages, lepers had to wear cowbells around their necks as a warning to passers-by.

Leprosy made the sufferer a social outcast. While other people react with revulsion and fear at the sight of a leper, Jesus is moved with compassion. He could have cured him merely with a word, as He sometimes does in the Gospels. But Jesus deliberately *touches* him. In making him clean, Jesus not only restores his physical life but his social life as well. Now, freed from the disease, nothing can separate him from his family and friends.

Today's readings challenge us to recognize a condition we suffer from, far more devastating than any physical malady, however repulsive. That condition is our sinfulness in all its form and with all its consequences. The destructiveness that comes from our own sins is far more

serious than any physical disease, for it can destroy, separate, isolate, alienate, deform, cripple and eventually bring death to the heart and mind and spirit of the one who allows it to go unrecognized, unchecked and unrepented. Like Dorian Gray, we try to hide our sins from others, because deep down, we are ashamed of them. But we cannot hide them from the Lord who sees beyond the self-portrait we present to others and penetrates our deepest and truest self.

As we gather for the Eucharist, the same Lord who reached out and gave the leper His hand, reaches out to us and gives us His whole body, His whole true self. He looks upon us with the same deep compassion that His eyes conveyed to the leper. He reminds us that the disease of sin can be healed in ourselves and in our world. Just as the leper calls out to Jesus, “If you will to do so, you can cure me,” may the Holy Spirit embolden each of us to do the same.

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