

# 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year

## Year B

### *Jesus, Friend Of Outcasts.*

*To bring help to outcasts, Jesus himself had to become an outcast  
and 'stay outside in places where nobody lived'.*

(Readings: Leviticus 13: 1-2, 44-46. 1 Corinthians 10: 31- 11: 1. Mark 1: 40-45.)

It is an integral part of our human language that we sometimes communicate what we mean, not so much by what we actually say, but more by the *way* we say it. For example, when we have been a few minutes late for a meeting, or to start work (or be on time for the start of Mass) we have all experienced someone saying 'good morning' to us in that particular tone; a tone marked with a slightly sardonic note, intended to put us in our place, rather than extend the friendly wish the words are outwardly meant to convey.

When the leper in today's Gospel says to Jesus, "If you want to you can cure me", we might well wonder at the tone of his words. Is he saying: "Go ahead, I know you can do it." Or is he taunting Jesus: "*If* you want to, you can cure me."

Notice how the '*if*' is in front of the '*want*', and not the '*cure*'. The leper doesn't doubt Jesus' power to cure him. Rather, he doubts his good will. He questions whether Jesus *wants* to cure him. The leper's attitude begs the question, 'Has he been a religious and social outcast for so long that he has come to doubt whether anyone has the will or the care to bother with him?'

When people question our good intentions, we naturally tend to get a bit nonplussed, even flustered. But how does Jesus react to the leper? The translation we hear in today's Gospel reading, coming from the Jerusalem Bible, says Jesus 'felt sorry for him'. But many of the early Greek manuscripts translate it as Jesus *fumed*. Or, as the Revised English Bible has it, 'Jesus was moved to *anger*'. The New English Bible offers something of a compromise, saying, 'Jesus reacted with warm indignation'.

In any event, Jesus voices his protest when he says "Of course I want to! Be cured!" Then he sternly orders the leper to say nothing to anyone. Even so, and despite Jesus' clear instruction, the man goes off and broadcasts the whole affair to all-and-sundry.

In one of those strange paradoxes in life, while the cured man can now move about freely, whereas Jesus has to hide in places where nobody lives. Socially speaking, they seem to have exchanged places.

This brief encounter between Jesus and the leper, with its strained interactions and charged emotions, gives us a rare insight into Jesus' earthly ministry. It also gives us the opportunity to ask what kind of Jesus emerges from Mark's portrait of him.

Mark, the author of the first Gospel (that is to say, the first to be written) is well known for presenting a very human Jesus; a Jesus who demonstrates wholly human feelings, and with very strong human emotions; a Jesus who is critical, angry, impatient, even fearful.

Mark's portrait inevitably prompts a number of other essential questions; questions about our own perception and understanding of Jesus; questions about the human character of Jesus.

For example, do we think of Jesus as someone who never gets ruffled, or who is never troubled or fazed by anything? Does he have his own reactions to people and events? Does he ever get angry or lose his temper? And if he does, does he ever give vent to his temper when the people he is trying to help question his intentions?

Does Jesus ever grow tired when people treat him like some kind of a mystical, magical wonder-worker, or a walking, talking relic, without even trying to understand his teaching, that no amount of miraculous healing is ever going to exempt people from suffering or brokenness?

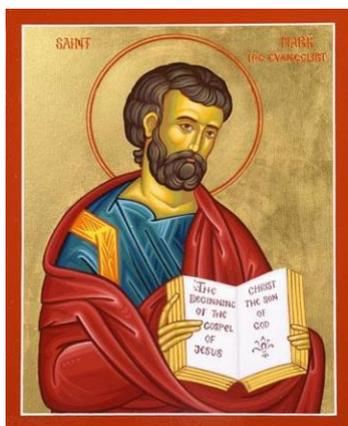
Is Jesus ever daunted by people's apparent boundless expectations, or ever overwhelmed by the sheer weight of hope and trust which people put in him? Does he get annoyed when he is misrepresented? Is that why he tells people to stay quiet?

Does Jesus ever get nervous, or anxious, when people try to manipulate him, or use him for their own personal or political causes? Does the pressure of his ministry ever become so intense that he feels he cannot cope, and is forced to go and hide away somewhere secluded? Does Jesus ever just get plain fed up with it all, or driven to the point where he wonders why he is even bothering?

These are just some of the questions that are either directly, or indirectly, raised by Mark in his Gospel. And these questions have a timeless element about them, timeless because they all seek to address our own understanding, our own personal perceptions of the person, and of the humanity of Jesus.

Mark's portrait of Our Lord is often quite blunt. It can even be shocking in places. That is why Mark's Gospel was so rarely appointed to be read in the Church's earlier liturgies, waiting a long time before being accepted fully into its right and proper celebration. Even so, its particularly candid insight into the humanity of Jesus is one that profoundly touches so very many people, arguably, more so than, say, the deeply reflective theology of John, or the brilliantly incisive teachings of Matthew.

Above all, and whatever his critics may think, Mark believes, and he believes it without question, that Jesus *is* the Son of God. It is in that belief he portrays Jesus in such a human light; that anyone who cares to, can identify with Jesus on a very personal and intimate level.



And so, immersed in the strengths, and in the limitations of humanity, the Jesus we meet in Mark's Gospel is alive. And he is real. And he is always endeavouring to be authentic.

For many, it is Mark who gives the most moving account of the Lord's commitment to a broken and fragile humanity.

In earlier centuries Mark had been ignored, and he had been shunned. But now, the Church has rediscovered his work, like a long lost treasure. The good news in all of this is that, when we rediscover the Gospel according to Mark, we rediscover the person, and the humanity of Jesus.