

Our readings today teach about suffering

Something that is common to all human beings

It may be physical, mental, moral or spiritual

But since the fall of Adam and Eve

Every human being has suffered

There is another aspect of suffering that is unique to humans

Suffering can be a means of evangelization or discipleship

But for it to be this

We need the right intention

In suffering we witness our vulnerability

Our desperate need for God and others

When we find ourselves on the fringes

It is there we can experience the tenderness and compassion of God

Often through the touch of another human being

And it is there we can encounter the touch of Christ

A touch that can heal our spirit and soul, if not our body

And it is through suffering that we participate in the cross of Christ

Joined to him

Our suffering is anything but worthless

It attains infinite value

Tuning to him in times of suffering

We are able to witness the joy of salvation

And proclaim it to others

This way, suffering becomes a means of discipleship

Without this, we will still suffer

But we will be missing out on the blessings it can yield

Although leprosy is an extreme example

It gives us insight to all suffering

Because it entails all aspects of suffering

It is physical

The lesions on the skin

The flesh dies and rots away

It is spiritual

The lepers are isolated from society

They were removed from their homes and their cities

Placed in leper colonies

They are even denied a simple human touch

We see this in the first reading

This disease was thought to be a reflection of sin

If a person had a lesion on their skin

They did not go to the doctor

They went to the priest

If the priest declared the person unclean

They would be sent away from the community

If the lesion went away

They would again go to the priest to be declared clean

And given a sacrifice to offer before returning to the community

But before that, there were society norms they had to follow

If a clean person touched anything unclean

They had to go through purification rites

So if one had leprosy

And a person unknowingly approached

The leper would call out 'Unclean, Unclean!' as a warning

This sets the stage for our Gospel

Ignoring these society norms

The leper comes right up and kneels before Jesus

Notice he does not ask for a cure

Nor does he demand it is due to him

He simply throws himself at his feet

A form of worship, seeking mercy

If you wish

You can make me clean

And on his part, Jesus does not back away

He is moved with pity

He reaches out

Touches him

I do will it

Be made clean

Then Jesus instructs him to go to the priest

Offer what is prescribed

That will be proof for them

But the man goes and tells everyone that will listen

And not it is no longer the leper that is removed from society

It is Jesus that cannot enter a town openly

Remaining in deserted places

And yet the crowds keep coming to him

As I mentioned

Suffering is a means of witnessing

So what can the leper teach us today?

First, there is a general misunderstanding of suffering

For many, it seems as if this is God's will for me

And if He has given me this cross to bear

Isn't it a sin to try to get away from the suffering?

To find a cure?

If not a sin, this would at least be an unspiritual approach, right?

We also see it is easier to grasp suffering in general terms

It is much more difficult to understand why this happened to me?

Or why did my loved one get cancer, have an accident or was abused?

The leper represents all suffering

Physical, mental and spiritual

He comes to Jesus to be cleansed

He is seeking

He is courageous in approaching Jesus

We, too, are called to seek cleansing

Especially through the Eucharist and confession

And we see Jesus responding with mercy

It is mercy that relieves suffering

Jesus is moved with pity

With compassion

This is what Christ came to do

This episode is an icon of the Church's sacrament

In Fire of Mercy, Heart of the Word

Leiva-Merikakis writes:

"In Christ's action of healing as the visible sign of God's invisible grace

And the leper's invisible faith

We have the perfect form of a sacrament.

The physical gesture of Jesus' hand touching the man's body

Accompanied by the words, 'I want it; be healed!'

God intervenes in our world as a saving act

**The power of Christ's word and his touch cleanses this man
immediately**

He does not heal to prove a point

To prove to anyone that he is God

In fact, he tells this man to go show himself to the priest

To offer what is prescribed

To be readmitted into the community is a part of being cleansed

He tells the man specifically do not tell others of this cleansing

His call for restraint was taking one form of suffering

And replacing it with another

Jesus needed time to complete his mission

He needed to be able to move about freely

This was for the good of others

But the man could not refrain himself

In this, we are called to follow the example of St Paul

**We are blessed to look at suffering from this side of the cross
and resurrection**

Paul tells us:

Do everything for the glory of God

Not for ourselves and our own purposes

Follow his example of not seeking my own benefit

But that of the many

Avoid giving offense to Jews

To Greeks or to the Church of God

Be imitators of me

As I am of Christ

Medical science has brought under control many physical ailments

Including leprosy

But hate, anger, bitterness, arrogance, pride, egoism, envy and fear

These and so much more remain in hearts around the globe

These isolate us from each other

There is one that can cleanse us

If we only have the courage to come before him

To worship and seek

If you wish it, you can make me clean

So we may hear the words every one of us desires

Your sins are forgiven, go in peace