

Skin is amazing stuff. It stretches, it shrinks, and it is mostly waterproof. It cools us down and warms us up.

We tan our skin, or we protect it from the Sun, we scrub it, we paint it temporarily with make-up, we color it permanently with inks, we pierce it with metal, we oil it, lotion it and perfume it.

Our skin is important to us.

And when our skin is attacked by disease, we fight back. Diseases of the skin, from dandruff to acne, from psoriasis to cancer, are all a breach of the integrity of our skin.

Restoring the integrity, healing these breaches can be as simple as soap and water or as complicated as surgery. Whatever the cure, no one doubts the value of restoring and protecting our skin.

In today's scriptures we are confronted with a specific skin disease... leprosy. Now I have read that in biblical times, leprosy could apply to a great number of skin diseases, and perhaps this is true, but I don't think we are talking about a bad case of acne here.

Leprosy was and is as much a social disease as it is physical. In the first reading we heard of the laws required of the leper in Jewish society.

Pretty strict stuff designed to keep the leper out and away from those that are considered "clean" or "undefiled".

Their movements within society were strictly regulated. There were places they could not go, and certainly, no one could come to them. Lepers lived among other lepers, much as they still do today.

In the Old Testament there are only two cases of someone being cured of leprosy. One was a man called Naaman who was healed by God through the ministry of Elisha (2 Kings 5:1-27) and the other was Miriam, Moses' sister who was healed by God when Moses prayed for her (Num 12:9-15).

Notice both cures are attributed to God.

Last week, we heard of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law. It was a true miracle, and it helped to establish Jesus as a prophet in the hearts of the people.

But now Jesus "kicks it up a notch".

Curing a leper was on the same scale as raising the dead! Only God could do that!

Jesus does not pray to God as Moses did for Miriam. He does not command a particular ritual for the leper like Elisha did of Naaman. He demonstrates that His is the power of God.

Jesus touches Him and says "Be made clean". Just as God commanded "Let there be light", the power of God is in the speaking of the command. Simply put what God says.... Happens.... what God speaks.... is.

God has come among us, God becomes one of us... and that changes everything. The untouchable is touched. His words dispel darkness and disease. How could the healed man keep quiet? How could he keep from singing?

This is how we can understand this event in a literal way.

But there is also an allegorical meaning to this Gospel.

Here, and elsewhere in the Gospels, leprosy represents, sin, death and all that has gone wrong with the human soul.... Inherently good and made in the image of God.... when the soul is clean, nothing is brighter or more beautiful. But tainted by the sore of sin, it becomes covered in leprosy.

Each time I sin, it is as if a new sore appears on my soul. I dishonor my parents, and a boil is raised. I lie and a cut appears. I cheat someone and my soul receives a pustule.

Now, if this sort of thing happened to our actual skin, how would we react?

We would seek medical attention; we would undergo the tests needed to make a diagnosis and to find a cure. We would follow the course

prescribed by our dermatologist; whether that might be a dose of antibiotics or in a more extreme case, we would have the sore cut out of us.

Isn't it odd how *many* of us deal with this kind of breach of integrity to our souls. Most of us, including myself, are often more willing to cover it up with some sort of make-up and hope no one really notices.

However as sin increases, the boils burst, the pustule become purulent and the cuts become infected, and so what we need is more make-up, right? No, we need a cure, or it will only get much, much worse.

We cannot see our own souls, and thank God we can't see each others, but Jesus sees them and no amount of make-up can hide it from Him.
(PAUSE)

In the Gospel today, it says that Jesus is moved with pity upon seeing the leper.

It might make us think that Jesus just feels sorry for the leper, and by extension, feels sorry for us as well.

But the Greek word used to describe "moved with pity" expresses a "bowel-wrenching" reaction. It is visceral, a blow to the very gut of God.

It is more like a kind of anger than pity more love than sympathy.

It is the same word used to describe how Jesus felt at the tomb of Lazarus, where we read that He wept because He loved his friend.

(PAUSE)

My friends, I believe that this story is meant to help us realize our own disease, our own sin, but more importantly, it should send us running to Jesus, the Divine Physician. It is meant to prompt us to paraphrase the words of the leper:

"Jesus, if you want, you can make me clean". "Bless me Father, for I have sinned" (PAUSE)

Jesus, moved with love through the priest says: “I absolve you of all your sins” words that can be heard as “Be made clean”

And immediately, the integrity of our souls is restored. The breeches made by sin are healed; it becomes radiant as light and we too feel the joy and freedom of the former leper, and we cannot help but tell of the love and power of Jesus. How can we keep from singing?