

## Homily 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday Ordinary Time 2024

Have you ever been taught a lesson that you will never forget? When I was in Sierra Leone in the parish of Port Loko I was taught such a lesson by my Parish Priest, Fr Victor Bongiovanni, a saintly pastor. A leper from an outlying village had visited the church. The man's body was eaten away by disease, and he stood like a Ghandi-like figure, thin and emaciated. Victor asked me to taxi the man back to his village in 'the bush' some 5 miles away, which I was gladly willing to do. I got the pick-up truck and cleared the back of it so as the man could sit reasonably comfortably in the rear, outside of the cabin, As I was about to drive off Victor came storming out of the church and berated me for my lack of respect for and insensitivity to the leper. 'He sits in the cabin with you!' he told me in no uncertain terms. 'He is a child of God not some unclean object to be marginalised and humiliated!' I had learned a lesson for life and the man came into the passenger seat next to me.

In the Book of Leviticus, part of The Torah the first five books of the Bible, it states that: "If a swelling or scab or shiny spot appears on a man's skin, a case of leprosy of the skin is to be suspected. The man must be taken to Aaron, the priest, or to one of the priests who are his sons. The man is leprous: he is unclean. The priest must declare him unclean; he is suffering from leprosy of the head. A man infected with leprosy must wear his clothing torn and his hair disordered; he must shield his upper lip and cry, "Unclean, unclean." **As long as the disease lasts, he must be unclean; and must live apart: he must live outside the camp.**" It is clear that leprosy was feared and greatly misunderstood at the time of Moses, and that lepers were ostracised from the community and stripped of their human and God given dignity.

In today's Gospel, Jesus in contrast, acts with love towards a leper and 'feels sorry for him'. He then does the unthinkable and stretches out his hand and touches the man and, in an act of compassion and mercy, tells the man, "Of course I want to heal you, 'Be cured!'" He then requires the man to follow the law prescribed by Moses, to go and show that he has been healed to the priests and make the prescribed offering, This, is a prime example of what Jesus meant when he stated, "I have not come to abolish The Law but to bring it to perfection." He respects The Torah, but he makes it clear that love, compassion and mercy are more important than laws.

We, as Catholics are arguably, today in the words of a parishioner 'racked with guilt and duty'. Whilst The Old Testament laws numbered 613 which led the leaders into legalism and casuistry, we Catholics are bound by 1752 laws in The Revised Code of Canon Law which The Church often quotes to justify the marginalisation of individuals and groups from the Christian Community. Whilst I do acknowledge that laws are necessary to guide us, I also must add that it is foolish to follow laws blindly. Jesus used the wisdom of that approach. Whilst he shows respect for The Law, he sees its perfection in embracing the marginalised with love welcoming them with mercy back into the fold.

Fr Victor exemplified that wisdom and taught me a sobering lesson in Christian discipleship. Whereas before I acted like an Old Testament Pharisee casting people out, Victor taught me to try to be more Christ-like inviting the 'lost' back into the 'cabin' of a loving and compassionate Christian Community.