

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR B

Second Reading 1 Corinthians 10: 31– 11: 1

This short passage occurs at the end of a discussion (chapters 8–10) on whether it was acceptable for Christians to eat food previously offered as a sacrifice to pagan idols. In the busy port of Corinth, there were many pagan temples, including that devoted to Aphrodite, the goddess of fertility. Such meat was readily available on the market place and often served at parties and dinners. On occasion it was also given to the poor.

Earlier in this letter (1 Cor. 13–15, 17–20; the reading for the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time), Paul suggests that Christians were free from having to adhere to every Jewish law, although this does not mean that everything is acceptable. None the less, Christians of the time might encounter difficulties if they socialised with non-Christians and were offered sacrificial food to eat.

Paul urges caution. When dealing with others, whether believers or not, our actions should not be solely concerned with our own good, but also with the good of others. God will not be given glory if our actions have negative consequences.

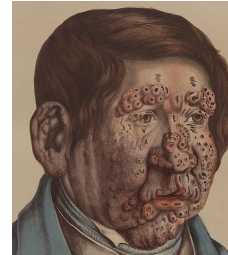
The best thing is to model ourselves on Christ: 'Love one another as I have loved you'. These guidelines are still useful to us today as we endeavour to maintain our Christian identity in an increasingly secular culture.



Gospel Mark 1: 40–45

Healing miracles

In today's passage, Mark tells us about yet another healing miracle of Jesus. It is the third in as many weeks, and the account follows the same pattern as previously. Jesus heals an individual and then moves on.



Leprosy

What medical science now recognises as leprosy, the debilitating skin condition sometimes called 'Hansen's disease' (after the Norwegian physician who first identified the bacterium that causes it), was in fact all but non-existent in biblical times. However, the word was adopted in the King James Bible, and kept in subsequent translations. This general idea of 'leprosy' could cover a host of dermatological complaints, from psoriasis to dermatitis.

Being a leper

The diagnosis of leprosy was in many ways a sentence to exile. Clothing that had been in contact with the disease was burned; houses afflicted with it were torn down; people beset by it were avoided 'like the plague'. Society as a group sought to protect itself by ostracising the sick person. The Book of Leviticus (today's First Reading) details carefully the conduct which had to be kept. People also believed that leprosy was caused by one's sins or by demons.

Any healing, whatever its cause, needed to be witnessed by the priest. According to Mosaic Law, he alone was able to declare the person 'clean': i.e. pronounced able to take their place in society once again.

The encounter between Jesus and the leper

The two parties here both break the accepted rules. The leper fails to observe the prescribed 12-foot distance, while Jesus actually touches the sick man.

Clean and unclean

The contact between Jesus and the leper is in clear breach of the rules. By touching him, Jesus himself becomes unclean, and as an outcast has to move out of town. Yet it would seem that the people were not deterred, and followed him wherever he went.

'Mind you say nothing to anyone. Go and show yourself to the priest'

This suggests that Jesus is keen to follow the detail of Mosaic Law. It may partly explain why he asks the leper not to spread the news of his healing: the leper must go and see the priest first.

His words also recall Mark's 'Messianic secret': the idea that Jesus does not wish to reveal who he truly is at this stage. (See the Prego Plus for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, commenting on Mark 1: 21–28.)