

## 6<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR B

Most people have heard or read about Fr. Damian, the saintly 19<sup>th</sup> century Belgian priest who dedicated his life to serving the lepers in the Hawaiian island colony of Molokai. In the end he caught the terrible disease himself, and continued serving his fellow lepers until he died. Leper colonies still exist today in some African countries and, even though this disease has been banished from the West, the horror of it remains with us even to this day.

The film *The Elephant Man* was about a man in 19<sup>th</sup> century England who also had a terrible skin disease. In fact his head had swelled up and was greatly enlarged, and he had elephant-like skin. Until he was 21 he was treated like an idiot and employed as a side-show in a circus. Could there be anything more degrading. Eventually, doctors discovered that he wasn't an idiot at all, but a cultivated man who read widely and had an ear for music. He finally escaped from the circus and, when in public, would cover his head with a piece of sack cloth. But one day his appearance terrified a small child. Angry people chased him and ripped the sack off his head. Then someone in the crowd asked, "What is that?" and he replied, "I am a human being – I am a human being!!" How terribly painful it must have been for him to be stripped of his human dignity that he had to tell people over and over "I am a human being."

The first reading we heard today gives us the Old Testament regulations regarding leprosy. This is how lepers were treated even in the time of Christ. They were isolated from society and had to call out "unclean, unclean" as soon as anyone approached. Again, how degrading is that.

The most moving thing in the gospel story we just heard is not that Jesus healed this leper, but that before he healed him, he "stretched out his hand and touched him." How long had it been since anyone had touched that man? Ten, twenty... thirty years?? How much more painful that experience must have been than the leprosy itself. Just think of the emotional isolation of this chap – the absence of warm, affirming human relationships – and the longing to be touched or embraced by another human being, yet never experiencing it. What overpowering feelings must have welled up inside of him when he felt Jesus touching him! When Jesus broke the Law and reached out to this man who was disfigured and repulsive-looking, he was equivalently saying to him, "Even though you have been degraded and treated as something less than

human, I am saying to you now, “You *are* a human being – you *are* a human being.”

Although we don’t see physical leprosy anymore, the emotional deprivation that went along with it is still very much with us. There are many people who don’t have a close relationship with anybody or who feel like outsiders from the mainstream community. These are some of the lepers of our day – the “elephant men” of our time. Married folk who live in an emotional desert from their partner. Young people – and not so young ones – whose frantic seeking after pleasure is often a symptom of dreadful inner pain and emotional isolation, experienced even in their own homes. Immigrants who desperately want to be understood and accepted in a new country, but who feel alienated because of the antics of a few. Old people who believe they have been abandoned by family and community because they are no longer useful.

“Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him,” There is no easy solution for the inner pain that many people experience – whether it is the leprosy of emotional deprivation or the suffering of those other lepers of our day – those who are HIV positive or are living with AIDS, or who are fighting the demons of alcohol or drug addiction. We can all stretch out our hands and our arms with compassion, and touch someone’s life in deeper, more honest and more enriching ways. That’s what the Lord challenged us to do when he reached out and touched the leper in today’s Gospel – he challenged all of us to reach more deeply inside ourselves – to touch the deepest, purest humanity within us – to have the courage to raise up even the most rejected person with the message, “You *are* a human being.”