

## ***6 Sunday of Year B – Remedial Action***

Every society tries to remove from its midst those who are considered to be a danger to the well being of the community. The most serious offenders are put in jail.

Besides those persons who have clearly shown themselves to be a real menace there are many others whom we segregate in some way because we *think* they may endanger our welfare.

For example: people who suffer from contagious and fatal diseases; or those who have certain mental disorders or compulsions; or those whose unpredictable behaviour seems to pose a threat – we feel safer if they are kept away from us.

Such segregation is a very understandable response, and in many cases is probably an appropriate one. But it can never be regarded as the end of the matter for a caring community.

We have the abiding responsibility of showing respect for the personal dignity of all our fellow human beings, and we must continue to have concern for their welfare and do all that we can to effect a cure or bring about their rehabilitation.

There is a very splendid tradition within the Christian churches of reaching out to those who have been excluded from the community, of identifying with them in their need.

Religious orders have been founded, charitable associations established, and many compassionate individuals have given unstintingly of themselves to care for the needs of those with dangerous contagious diseases, or of the severely mentally ill, and for prisoners – including those on death row.

All this is in complete accord with the teachings of our Lord. But while we might take justifiable pride in such a history of care we always need to reflect on and assess our own attitudes towards one another, especially those whom we call ‘offenders’. Today’s Gospel is a challenge to do just that.

There is another consideration. Like any human society the Christian community itself seeks protection from ideas and behaviour that seem to contradict its values and principles - that might lead to a falling away from its ideals, to a lowering of standards, to confusion of thought or corruption of morals.

So from the earliest times there has been the practice of ostracism which gave rise to the practice of what we call ‘excommunication’. There is an example of this in the letter of St Paul to the Thessalonians where he writes:

*If anyone refuses to obey what I have written in this letter take note of him and have nothing to do with him, so that he will feel he is in the wrong. Do not regard him as an enemy, however, but rather as a brother in need of correction. (2 Thess. 3:14)*

There is another example in his second letter to the Corinthians where Paul writes:

*Someone has been the cause of pain to all of you. The punishment already imposed on the man in question is enough; the best thing now is to give him your forgiveness and encouragement, or he might break down from such misery. So I am asking you to give some definite proof of your love for him. (2 Cor. 1:5-9)*

It is clear from these passages that the punishment of ‘excommunication’ or ostracism was not intended to be simply punitive – punishment for its own sake, or some kind of revenge – always it was to be remedial: for the healing of the person concerned.

We are never to forget the love we owe to our brothers and sisters. We are to remember that much of the behaviour we might find unacceptable or offensive results from human weakness, or human need, or human confusion, or from the persistent pressure of evil influences in someone’s life – pressures to which we are all vulnerable – *There but for the grace of God go I.*

True followers of Jesus cannot exclude anyone from compassion or concern – no matter what they have been guilty of. We believe, after all, that no one is beyond redemption. Somehow we are to keep the door of our community and our hearts always open to receive back, and again accept the one who has sinned against us.

Regrettably, it happens all too often that when the Christian community is scandalised it turns its back on those who have offended, ostracising them.

Jesus’ attitude to the leper in the story today is expressive of his attitude to all personal corruption – be that physical, moral, or spiritual. The sick are to be cured, the hurt are to be heartened, the dead are to be raised up again.

In our prayer, in our daily living, in our Christian endeavours we are to try to hold in our love all our brothers and sisters – even those who, like the leper, seem to pose a real threat to our well-being. Jesus does not hesitate to take the risk of reaching out. In the second Reading St Paul tells us:

*Be helpful to everyone at all times, not anxious for your own advantage, but for the welfare of everyone, that they may be saved. (1 Cor.10:31 - 11:1)*

Today, the Word of God calls us to adopt such an attitude of mind and heart, and behave accordingly.