

In just a few days, we will gather here again to place ashes on our heads and to begin the 40 days of Lent. The liturgy for this Sunday gives us a good segue into the penitential season that is soon to come.

In the Gospel Jesus healed a man with Leprosy. It is difficult to overstate how terrible this disease was at the time of Jesus. There was no cure for leprosy at that time and so it was a slow and painful death sentence. And leprosy was highly contagious, so it meant that a person who contracted the disease was forced to be ostracized from the community so that others would not be infected. We heard this described in the first reading from Leviticus. This is what the Hebrew law commanded for lepers: they must keep their garments torn and their head bare and their beard muffled. They must live outside the camp away from everyone else. And if someone approached them, they must cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” Imagine having to live such a miserable, lonely existence. While suffering from such a painful disease, one could not even find comfort in family or friends. One could not even join the community for worship in the temple.

Yet, even such a terrible disease as leprosy could not withstand the healing power of Jesus. With a touch and a word, Jesus dismissed the disease and healed the man. And what a gift this healing was! Jesus gift of healing the man allowed him to reenter into society, it allowed him to join the community for worship once again. That man was like the sheep that was lost and has been found!

This healing power of Jesus did not pass away when the Lord ascended into heaven. Through His Church, Jesus continues to work great healings, especially through the two sacraments of healing.

The anointing of the sick is a powerful sacrament for anyone who is suffering with a serious illness or infirmity. Through the sacramental graces of anointing, the Lord sometimes brings about physical healings. And in this sacrament, the Lord always brings about the spiritual healing and comfort and strength that we need to face our suffering. I myself experienced the power of this sacrament in a woman who woke from a coma to hear me pray the words of anointing and then return to the coma until she died. There is incredible grace in the anointing of the sick.

And in the sacrament of reconciliation, we experience the great mercy of God, who is always eager to forgive us. Through our sinfulness, all of us at times can be like the man with leprosy - distant from God and distant from our community, whom we harm by our sins. But in confession, through the words of a priest and the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus removes our spiritual uncleanness and reconciles us to God the Father. As a priest, I am constantly in awe of the great power and mercy of God who forgives and heals all our offenses in that sacred place of the confessional. And I am especially in awe of the courage and humility of those who return to the confessional after a long time away or who confess great sins with honesty and contrition.

In these two sacraments of healing, the tender mercy of God is offered to us, just as it was offered to the poor man with leprosy. As we prepare for the holy season of Lent, let us resolve to make use of these sacraments. If you or a loved one are suffering from an illness or preparing for a serious surgery, call on your priest for the anointing of the sick. If you have been away from the sacrament of reconciliation for too long or if you are conscious of having committed a serious sin, come to the sacrament of reconciliation to receive not judgement or condemnation but God's perfect love and forgiveness.

Let us draw near to the Lord Jesus in the sacraments of healing, for His will for us is to make us clean.