

Notice how much easier it is this weekend to see how the 1st reading was chosen to go with the Gospel? That these two readings are meant to work together – this week giving us a better understanding of leprosy. . .

Those of you who are doing the “read the Bible in a year” program – know well how difficult it is to understand the Old Testament – so perhaps those who put together the lectionary were really doing us a favor to allow us some insight into the Old Testament by pairing them with Gospel readings --- if nothing else, to take a little of the mystique out of those readings. . .

For most people in our society – externals matter – those things that are visible on the outside.

Walk through the grocery store – every package is designed to get our attention – just the right graphics, just the right colors, just the right text: to scream: “Buy Me”

Never judge a book by its cover? I have – as well as a bottle or two of wine – some book jackets and creative labels are just irresistible.

If you want to sell your house – better spiff it up a bit – making sure that it is staged just right --both inside and outside.

Going to a job interview? – better put on a suit and tie or a nice dress – make sure you are properly groomed – or you might not even get in the door.

Externals – what people see—do matter.

And yet – in the whole scheme of things – the externals are relatively small stuff.

Yes we can be focused so much on a person’s appearance – that we may not even know they are suffering from a debilitating illness and can’t do the little day-to-day things we all take for granted. . .

What about the person who doesn’t know if he or she will be able to pay their rent this month?

What about the person who is lonely, forgotten, and who has no friends?

What about the person who isn’t sure if his or her marriage will survive?

Does all of this show on the outside? Sometimes it does--- just by the person having a sad disposition --but -- these are heavy crosses to bear – and sometimes we don’t even know they are being carried.

Jesus knew the difficulty of bearing crosses. . .

We see his love and compassion and healing power on full display once again today. Although leprosy is a very *external* disease – easily seen by all – scabs, and pustules, and blotches – thank you Leviticus --- leprosy also inflicts many *internal* wounds: isolation, loneliness, desperation, and despair –

so when Jesus heals lepers –

he is not just healing the exterior signs of leprosy – but all the interior social stigmas that come with it. . .

and in this case --- tells the leper something somewhat puzzling: **“See that you tell no one anything. . .”**

What an unusual request!

Of course the man does exactly what most people would do – he immediately does the opposite ---- tells EVERYONE! After all, he experienced a miracle – an unmistakable action of God. That’s big stuff – life-changing stuff. And the former leper wants to make sure everyone knows about it!

And the easiest possible explanation behind Jesus’ seemingly strange request is a very practical one: Jesus knew that if word got out that he could heal leprosy and all kinds of other diseases – he would be overrun with people coming to him from everywhere.

And this is, of course, exactly what happened. People raced to see him, especially those who needed something specific from him – needed their own miracle. . . “ the whole town was standing at the door,” as we heard last week --- even when Jesus goes off to a deserted place to be alone, to get a little peace and quiet ---- they come looking for him. . .

But is this the whole story? Is this the only reason Jesus told this man, and others he cured – not to tell anyone about it – because he didn’t want to be overwhelmed with requests ???

I don’t think so. . . no one can know for sure but my best guess is that Jesus did not want his message, his promise, what he was offering to all people – simply to be reduced to what could *only be seen on the outside* –the flashy sorts of miracles that got everyone’s attention.

Because there is so much MORE to what Jesus has to offer – much like with Job in last Sunday’s reading ---- the real miracles Jesus wants to perform are on the inside – **miracles of the heart, soul, and spirit. . .**

NOT that Jesus did not or does not care about those exterior things. He does, absolutely – because he did do them. . . and does them. Jesus

cares about our families and our relationships and all the circumstances of our lives – he came that we might have life and have it abundantly. . .

The hardest thing to do when it comes to faith – is to continue to believe EVEN WHEN the miracles don't occur in the way that we want them to – or think they need to: because remember: God is God – and we are not. . .

No one can know the mind of God and I'm not going to pretend to -- but perhaps God acts as God does – because he does understand our frustration and disappointment – even anger.

YET GOD DOES NOT WANT US TO DESPAIR! God wants us to continue to hope and believe – no matter what. And so, even if we don't understand the mind of God – we can and even should continue to ask God for what we NEED – as long as we do so with a heart that says: your will be done—not mine.

And yet for many of us -- how important the externals continue to be – but we need to remember they don't define who we are – they don't get a say as to whether our lives have value or meaning –

they don't even get a say in whether or not we are touched by the loving hand of God.

Because all of that --- is determined by the miracles *within* us. The power of the resurrection allows the hardened heart to soften,

-the cruel heart to become kind and compassionate

-the selfish heart to become generous

-the vindictive heart to become forgiving

-and the sinful heart to be washed clean –

--enabling us to once again start down a different path, a journey into the open arms of our loving God.

And I don't know about you – but if only one of these changes occurred to me on the inside – I would be out proclaiming that as a miracle – and I don't think God would mind if I told everyone about it!

Because it would allow even more people to be drawn into the open arms of our loving God.