

Strangely enough, none of the ecclesial powers-that-be have asked for my opinion, but we're a people who live in hope, so if they ever do, I might recommend that we, the Church, spend some time — perhaps a lot of time — pondering today's Gospel.

Here's why.

Sometimes in Scripture, what *isn't* said is just as important and instructive as what *is* said. Listen again to what Luke relates:

*It happened that there was a man full of leprosy in one of the towns where Jesus was; and when he saw Jesus, he fell prostrate, pleaded with him, and said, 'Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean.' Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I do will it. Be made clean.'*<sup>1</sup>

That's what we'd expect Jesus to do, isn't it? But what He *doesn't* do is probably even more important.

He doesn't tell the leper that he must first be worthy of His healing.

He doesn't ask the leper what he believes.

He doesn't make the leper jump through a series of contrived hoops.

He doesn't tell the leper He'll only help him if he first joins His disciples.

He doesn't recite the provisions of Mosaic Law that declare the leper ritually unclean.

No; none of that. Instead, Jesus touches him and heals him. Note: Jesus *touches* him — Luke makes a point of emphasizing that. Why? Because under Mosaic Law, the fact that Jesus touched him rendered Jesus ritually unclean, too. But He did it anyway.

We could all learn something from that. The Church teaches that Jesus is the first and primary catechist. Yes, exactly. He is.

Today, when we read or hear of Jesus healing the leper, it doesn't tend to make much of an impact on us, because two thousand years of cultural and religious history have inured us to the radical significance of Jesus' act. It wouldn't have been lost on His contemporaries, however, given that it flew in the face of both the religious and secular tenets of His time.

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 5:12-13 (NAB)

So why did He do it? In yesterday's First Reading, John gave us the answer. It's worth repeating:

*Beloved, we love God because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.<sup>2</sup>*

When Jesus told Pilate that "my kingdom is not of this world,"<sup>3</sup> this was an important part of what He was getting at. The kingdom that Jesus initiated during His earthly ministry, the kingdom that we, His followers, are called to help build until the day when He returns to bring it to its full fruition, has nothing to do with the hatreds and divisions stoked by the powers of this world. His kingdom isn't about power, it's not about forcing people to think and believe as we'd have them think and believe. As John summarizes it, it's about "lov[ing] God because he first loved us," and, as a consequence, "lov[ing our] brother."

What's more, someone is a brother or sister not because they're part of our Church, or because they're part of our race or nationality, or because they share our ideology, or because they're of a similar mind in this way or that, or even because they're someone of whom we approve for this reason or that. Someone is a brother or a sister because they share the same image of the Creator that we do. Jesus makes this quite explicit in any number of ways throughout the Gospel. "For if you love those who love you," Jesus teaches, "what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?"<sup>4</sup>

With the passage of two millennia or so, it's hard to imagine how radical a reorientation of values this was in the ancient world — and still is. In no small measure, this was why Christianity spread so quickly throughout the ancient world, particularly among those who were among the marginalized. It would be no less radical today, too, if we were to practice it with

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Jn 4:19-21 (NAB)

<sup>3</sup> Jn 18:36 (NAB)

<sup>4</sup> Mt 5:46-47 (NAB)

the earnestness to which we're called, and to do so would likely have the same effect now as it did then.

For historical reasons, particularly in the aftermath of the Reformation, the Church has emphasized doctrinal matters. To the extent that doctrine influences how we think, and how we think influences how we act, there's a place for this. We shouldn't forget, though, that the Church grew rapidly in the ancient world not because of its doctrine (it took centuries to develop one), but because of its practice. It's true of religious faith generally, and of the Christian faith specifically, that faith is first and foremost a *practice*.

The Catholic Church in particular has it exactly right in emphasizing our sense of the Real Presence of Christ. It's important to remember, though, the Real Presence of Christ isn't confined to the altar. The Real Presence of Christ is also a practice, the practice with which we're to engage the world around us, just as Jesus taught and John wrote about.

It's a practice that, importantly, includes discerning the Real Presence of Christ in others, including those the powers and principalities of the world have declared outcasts or lepers for one reason or another, for only in this way can we hope to become the "victor[s] over the world"<sup>5</sup> that John exhorts us to be in this morning's Readings.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Jn 5:5 (NAB))