

## Epiphany 3, 2021

“I will, be thou clean”. (St. Matthew 8.3)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Last week, we heard how Jesus changed water into wine. That manifestation or display of His glory was a sign of what He wants to do in our hearts: He wants to transform us, through and through – our thoughts, our attitudes, our perspectives, our words, our behaviours, our relationships – every aspect of our lives. He wants to order and make beautiful and holy, our confused, dark and crooked passions. He yearns to mold us into His image and to give us His mind and heart. For all of this, He has given us His Spirit – the Holy Spirit – to live within us. This is the theme of the Epiphany Season: the showing forth of the glory of God and the transformation it brings. It is not stagnant, this Glory of glories; it is life-giving. And our Lord and Saviour intends for us to be touched by it, and healed, in our deepest part.

As we begin our time of reflection, let's take a minute to understand the context of this morning's Gospel. Some commentators point out that the two healings recorded in the Gospel are the first two of ten! There are ten miracles recorded by Matthew in chapters eight and nine. So, this is the beginning of a serious exhibition of miracles by the One with all authority; and St. Matthew notes that in the healings performed by Jesus, the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled. Isaiah said, “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases”. We are shown that Christ's healing power has no limit: there is nothing on earth that can withstand Him. That is incredibly hopeful for us, because it means, as St. Paul said, “that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8.39) He did, after all, not only heal every kind of disease, but He also conquered the forces of death and hell by His own Death and Resurrection.

Well let's move on. The healing of the leper was the first action of the Lord after His Sermon on the Mount. Today's Gospel tells us plainly: “When He came down from the mountain, great crowds followed Him. And behold a leper came to Him.” It was also the first time Jesus healed a leper. Leprosy was not only a terrible disease, it was also regarded as a form of uncleanness in the ancient world. To be declared ‘unclean’ meant that you were separated from your family and friends, temporarily or permanently. There was a horrible stigma that went with being a

leper, which came from this law recorded in the Book of Leviticus (13.45-46): “The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.”

In spite of all that, the leper came to Jesus and worshipped Him; and said, “If you will you can make me clean”. John Keble points out that the leper was not questioning Jesus’ power; but he was wondering about the Lord’s willingness to heal him. Here are his words again: “If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean”. It may be helpful to reverse the order: “You can make me clean, if you will – if you want to”.

The doubt voiced by this man probably stemmed from his belief that he was being punished by God for his sins. He may have wondered if he was worthy of saving. Leprosy causes the skin and flesh to decay. It brings an awful smell with it. Even the vocal chords are affected. So, although he seemed to believe that Jesus could heal him, he may have doubted whether he was worth the effort.

Of course he was worth it; so Jesus said, “I will, be thou clean”. But that was not all. The Scripture says that Jesus put forth His hand, and touched the man and said, “I will; be thou clean”. Keble underlined this touch. He said: “We know that Jesus did not need to touch the leper in order to heal him, because later in this same Gospel, He healed the centurion’s servant from a distance. What, then, was the point? Why did Jesus stretch out His hand and touch that leper?”

Princess Diana, as you remember, was Patron of the Leprosy Mission. She bucked the traditional view that leprosy was contagious, by touching those plagued with it. She said, “It’s always been my concern to touch people with leprosy, trying to show in a simple action that they are not reviled nor are we repulsed,” she said.

In 1993 she visited the Anandaban Hospital for Lepers in Nepal. A short You Tube video is available to show her in action. She went from bed to bed, shaking hands, cradling deformed limbs compassionately in her hands.

As one official later said: “She didn’t wear gloves and touched patients with her bare hands. She didn’t seem to have the fear that many others have.” Another confirmed this: “Most people come to see the work of the hospital, it’s about the

bigger picture. But Diana came to see the patients. It was about the people's stories for her. When she came into the hospital we expected her to stand by the bed and talk, but she sat on their beds and held their hands. The patients were touched and overwhelmed by her kindness." Why did she do this? Because she wanted the patients to know that she saw them as people, loved by others.

Perhaps we could take another moment on the touch of Jesus. What was He doing? Keble said, "It would be the deepest comfort to the poor man, so weary and heavy-laden, not only to hear His gracious voice, but to feel His loving and powerful hand laid upon him; which, in one moment, made up for all the sad and painful separation, which from time to time must have gone to his heart, ever since he had his leprosy."

To combat the separation – the separation from family and friends; to combat the feeling of being unworthy, unloved, unclean – on the one hand, Jesus touched this man to do away with his uncleanness. On the other hand, He touched him on the arm or the shoulder, in order to touch him in the deepest part of his soul; the part in us that gets anxious about whether we belong; the part that wonders whether everything is going to okay; that part that needs constant reassurance that we are not alone.

In his book [In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts](#), doctor Gabor Mate speaks about this need for emotional connection – this need to be "seen or appreciated for who we really are". In fact, he talks about our need to be "attuned" – to be "in tune" with someone else's emotional states. We all need to feel understood and accepted. "Attunement," says Mate "is the real language of love, the conduit by which a preverbal child can realize that she/he is loved". Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel says it this way: "Our ability to regulate emotional states depends upon the experience of feeling there is a significant person in our life is simultaneously experiencing a similar state of mind". The need to be accepted and understood – to be 'in tune with someone who loves us' -- is so essential to human beings, that if it is absent when we are babies, our tendency towards addiction increases. This all fits, of course, with what we have heard about a baby's failure to thrive if it is not held and rocked and sung to. ...Therefore, having considered all of this, Jesus, our great Physician "put forth His hand, and touched him saying, 'I will; be thou clean.'"

It's time for the "So what?" question – 'So what does all of this mean for me, and for the Church?' 'What is the Lord saying to us?' 'And what is He calling us to do?' Well, it is critical for us to hear the Lord speaking to us personally in this Gospel. In a certain way, we are all that leper. We have anxieties about separation; we carry the infection of original sin; we are fallen people – less than what God created us to be; we are miserable sinners; spiritual lepers. BUT, we, too, have been touched by the Lord Jesus. Not physically, but truly: in our deepest, essential part. Keble says that the Lord's first touch upon us was when we were baptized. He washed us, then, and mystically applied His precious Blood to take away the stains of our sins. He also adopted us, then, and made us His own. Think of that in terms of your need to be accepted; to be seen; to be understood; to belong. He adopted us and He freed us from the powers of spiritual darkness.

And, the Lord wants to touch our hearts and minds continually, in order to help us and strengthen us. Keble asked a very honest question of his Congregation about this continual touch. He asked, "How is it that you do not perceive, that the continual Touch, the inward Touch of our Lord's Body in the Holy Eucharist, is as necessary as (His) first Touch in Holy Baptism?" We are touched by His holy Word as we read and meditate upon it. We are touched by other Christians in fellowship. We are touched and led by the Holy Spirit in the life of prayer as we lay our thanksgivings and intercessions before our Heavenly Father. But the Lord calls us to His Table so that He may touch us, remind us, heal us, strengthen and refresh us; and so that we may be assured of our forgiveness and salvation through Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross.

And now, what is the Lord calling us to do? He is calling us to experience His transforming glory in Christ, through His Church. And, He is calling us, as the Church, to extend His reach to others who need to be touched by His glory. What do I mean? I mean that He calls us to, follow Him, as Princess Diana did. There are so many ways that we can reach out to others and combat the feelings of unworthiness, fear, anxiety, and loneliness. There are very simple things that we can do to say to someone, "I see you, and I care about you." A card, a phone call, an email. For years, my mother has made up baskets to cheer people up. Our family has experienced that same loving touch through you. In so many ways, you have encouraged us and helped us.

As a Congregation, the Lord has brought us into close contact with a new strain of leprosy – the homeless. For a variety of reasons they are separated from their families, and, in many cases considered to be unclean and unworthy. Surely, Jesus wants them to be touched in that deepest part of their souls – touched and healed and reunited with their families. And what is our role as the Body of Christ? There is no simple answer. There are safety and security issues and the need for addiction and mental health professional care; but, as Christians, we do have the unique HOPE and redeeming GRACE of Christ to offer. The communication of this hope and grace can be as simple as letting those in our community know that we ‘see’ them; that we hear them; that we care about them. We can pray for them by name. I believe that the answer to the homeless crisis in Moncton must involve the Church and the touch of our Saviour Jesus Christ. St. Paul speaks to this in the Epistle: he is talking about the Touch of Christ through the Body of Christ: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink...Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good”.

It is time to close. In today’s Collect we ask God to stretch forth His right hand to help and defend us. He is so ready to touch us. By His Spirit, He has touched us in our Baptism; in our Confirmation and through His Word. He has touched us often at His Table through the Holy Communion of His Body and Blood. And He yearns to be in constant communion with us – to have us attuned to His loving heart and His holy will. Our heavenly Father has manifested forth His glory that we might live in hope and promise and thrive in the new life of His Son. His glory, His beauty, His Truth and Grace have come to us so that we might be healed and transformed. This is the purpose of Christ’s coming: to offer us salvation and eternal life. This is the Gospel – the Good News we are called to share. Let us share it! Let us let His Light shine that others may feel the Saviour’s Touch.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost be ascribed all majesty, dominion, honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.