

- Mark portrait of Jesus, presents him as one who is active and compassionate, by the middle of the first chapter of the gospel, according to Mark, we find Jesus already actively engaged in his public ministry. And before the end of the first chapter, we have Mark's account, of Jesus, healing of the leper. In order to grasp the meaning and significance of this event, I think it is necessary to recall for a moment how lepers were viewed and how they were dealt with. We had a brief passage from the book of Leviticus, 13th chapter of Leviticus, and a part of the 14th chapter are given to detailed instructions about how to deal with lepers and with those suspected of having leprosy, Moses and Aaron are told what to do when as Leviticus 13 one puts it a man has on the skin of his body, a swelling or an eruption or a spot. And it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body. Leviticus goes on to say that the priests, shall examine, he shall perform certain tests, which were prescribed. And if leprosy is confirmed, shall pronounce the man unclean. The leper, who has the disease, says Leviticus, shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose behavior, characteristic of mourning. In this case, perhaps off one mourning, his own living death, Leviticus continued, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, Unclean! Unclean! He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall dwell alone in the habitation outside the camp, Why unclean this? Leviticus has in mind something more than the nastiness of the disease and indeed something more than we, when we think of the spread of a disease from one person to another, for the writers of Leviticus are thinking of a kind of supernatural contagion. The contagion which threatens to defile all black with which it comes in contact, the whole order of the social as well as personal, cosmic as well as historic, is threatened with defilement, through the contagion, which has appeared here. And so it must be contained, Roger Castillo in his book, Man and the Sacred, as written up this attitude towards uncleanness contagious, impurity. These various impurities, he writes, expose the entire community to danger, for nothing is more contagious than supernatural defilement, thus each society has, as his first duty, protection from defilement, by rigidly excluding from its midst, those who bear it, no relationships with the members of the group are allowed. And the host group tries to save itself from the pervergent poison that the offenders contain and carry, mentally and naturally. It seems probable that, many skin diseases were called leprosy were diagnosed as leprosy. Anyone with a skin disease might well find himself, declared a leper and be separated, segregated, banished, hence a carrier and container of the terrible contagion, if your skin cleared up. He had the possibility of presenting himself, to the priests, who would again, examine him. And if the priest determined that the leprosy was gone, and the contagion had vanished, he would then perform a rite of cleansing, a rite, which is described in the 14th chapter of Leviticus. And he may have been given a certificate, which attested that he was now clean. And now people could have relations with him, that again, he was a member of the community. Let us not hasten as we preachers are, want to do condemn out of hand, this ancient custom, leprosy was a dreadful disease. As indeed it has been until recent times. We have, I think to try to appreciate the anxiety, fear, the sheer terror that the people felt in the presence of this dreaded thing, by segregating the leper, or if need be those suspected of having leprosy, the community acted to protect itself, to protect itself, and that seems rational and prudent. But the question comes, are there higher values than prudence, is such prudence at all. And at what cost to the leper, at what cost to the man who was banished, who is put outside the camp, at what cost to him, does the community protect itself? Psalm 88,

has sometimes been called the lepers song, at any rate, this song gives poignant expression, to the feeling of a man, who has been cut off forsaken, Oh Lord, my God. I cry for help, by day, I cry out in the night before thee incline thine ear, to my cry, when my soul is full of troubles and my life draws near to you. I am reckoned among those go down to the pit. I am a man who has no strength, like one forsaken among the dead. Like the slain that lie in debris. Like those who thou dust, remember no more, for they are cut off from thy hand. Thou has caused my companions to shun me, Thou has made me a thing of horror, too I am shut in so that I cannot escape. My eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon thee, oh Lord, I spread out my hand to Thee, does thou work wonders for the dead. do shades rise up to praise Thee. Is thy steadfast love declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in a battle. Are thy wonders known in the darkness, for thy saving held me in the land of forgetfulness, is there saving help in the land of forgetfulness, the leper, believed, there is, for this Mark tells us, a leper came to Him, to Jesus, beseeching Him and kneeling said to Him, if you will, you can make me clean. Use your imagination. Behold in your minds eye, the sin with mark paints with a huge death stroke of his pen, moved with pity. He's stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will. Be clean. Mark goes on to relate miraculous cleansing of 11, not one, but two miracles are performed. And the greater of the two may pass the unnoticed. The greater miracle, was not to cleanse, but to touch him. He stretched out His hand and touched him, how far Jesus hand had to stretch, it had to reach across the chasm of custom, through the dread valley of paralyzing fear, beyond the barrier, a biblical prohibition. How far, it had to reach to the man, to the man, as he walked, to give, saving help in the land of forgetfulness, it was difficult, as difficult for Jesus, as it would be for you, or for me, how human, how natural to hold back to find another way. And yet Jesus touched him, and in the touching violated a taboo, which itself violated God's compassion, here as in the other events, in the life of Jesus, nothing less than a personal touch with the person in need would satisfy Jesus, a personal touch, with the person in need, we hear his words. I will, be clear, we often give primary attention to the words, on cases, the words, it used to be the costume, perhaps it still is in some circles, to print the words of Jesus in red, the kind of word honorary, if the outward expression may be permitted, but let us learn to listen to the language of His hands, the language of Jesus hands. What did Jesus say to the leper, with His hands? What do His hand say to us, who would be his disciples, hands do speak. They have a language of their own. How many of us have had to resort to that language of hands? When we found ourselves in another country and could not speak the foreign tongue. And so we talked, we communicated, we expressed something with our hands, then more frequently than not, we made ourselves understood. The language of the hands is more universal and sometimes more expressive, than the language of the tongue. Hands can say many things. A hand can say anger, when it is clenched in a fist, it can say friendship, when it is offered to another hand, it can say love when it ministers tenderly to a sick child. Hands can say adoration and supplication, when they are placed in prayer as a doers pray hand. I saw it the other day, the remarkable series of photographs, photographs of the hands of eight priests, saying mass, a priest does not say mass merely with his tongue, but also with his hands, in the gospel according to John we're told that the word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. That's the word became incarnate. It became a human voice and it became human hands. The hands of Jesus, Jesus spoke compassionately with his hands, by his hands He identified himself with a man in soul need, doing what all others refused to do, by his hands, by his touching of the leper, Jesus repudiated the isolation, the segregation, which customs, religion, and common sense had decree. He received the leper again into the human family. He reached down into the land of forgetfulness, the land of the living dead, to declare God's steadfast love and to restore hopelessness, to be sure not all were oblivious

to the lepers who lived as Leviticus puts it outside the camp food might be set out and other provisions may, but no one dared, indeed no one was expected to get close, let alone touch. It was enough to make some provision for the physical needs of the leper. The cartoon in Pugh showed a titled Lady, distributing charity, in slums from a limousine. One of the slum dwellers thanked her in unexpectedly fulsome turn. "Thank you lady. May we meet in heaven" The lady exclaimed, God forbid! and said sharply to her chauffeur drive off.

Your ass We have moved far from the concept of ritual and uncleanness and of supernatural contagion and defilement. We just don't consult the priestly writers of Leviticus, Our segregation have found other basis, race, religion, moray, and the rest. We know, it is not that we take no responsibility for others It is rather that the responsibility which we take is often very limited and indirect. We do not want to get involved. We will give a little of what we have, but nothing of ourselves, do not touch becomes all or cyber Monday, or we are afraid that it will cost to touch. That we will break something and we are right. It probably will cost, but we are disciples of one who did touch, who got involved, who gave Himself and that not without cost, for the hands that touched a leper's sores, were nailed to a cross. Jesus did not get away with impunity. And he does not promise impunity to us. Let me close with some words of F W H Myles, words, which he puts in the mouth, of John the Baptist. Ooh that the heavens were rent. And one came down, who saw men's hurt with kindlier eyes than mine, fiercer, than I resented every wrong, sweated, more painful drops than these, that flow in nightly passion for my people sins, died with it, lived beyond it, ye but now, if this indeed were Jesus, this is the land. And if so in one complete and sacred agony, he lifted all the weight of all the world and if men knew it, that were enough, it is enough. The leper knew it, in the touch of Jesus. And we know, lets pray. Oh God of heaven, who has set us in this common world, of human beatitude, Grant us there in to live willingly, taking true part with our fellows in humility and sacrifice. Give us to dwell as men among men in the measure and power of thine eternal kingdom. Serving with joy, the gospel of thine earth dwelling love, in Jesus Christ, our Savior. And now, may the love of God, our Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with us all. (choir voices)