

**Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time B - Jesus himself is our hope. He dwells in every Christian heart,**  
February 14, 2021.

For those observing the Lunar Calendar, **Happy New Year!** 新年快樂 恭喜發財 (Kung Hei Fat Choy, a blessing for wealth and prosperity). Today is the third day of the Lunar New Year (正月初三). The old custom calls it "Red Dog Day" (赤口日). According to traditional Chinese customs, the Red Dog is god of anger, so people stay at home to avoid conflicts and arguments with others bringing misfortune and poverty. Does it mean that we don't go to church and don't greet and talk to people today? No, the curses of the Red Dog Day was only a belief in the ancient Chinese culture though some Chinese still believe. But with the COVID 19 pandemic bylaw, we now have to avoid social gatherings and wear mask.

Leprosy was one of the most feared (and most frequently encountered) disease in ancient times. The bacterial skin rotted the victim's extremities (fingers, nose, lips...) and gave off a thoroughly foul smell. As explained in the first reading (Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46) lepers were isolated and left to die a slow, painful, humiliating death. By law they had to shout, "**Unclean, unclean!**" to warn people so as to avoid any close encounter. In the old days, leprosy was seen as a sign of God's punishment, a symbol of sin. To come into contact with a leper would make oneself unclean. In some sense, it is true that **sin is a kind of spiritual leprosy. It disfigures our souls and spreads into every corner of our lives. It destroys us and destroys our ability to relate to other people. It cuts us off from God and is much more serious because it remains invisible and goes unnoticed for a much longer time and may lead to spiritual death.** Just as leprosy starts small but spreads and grows, so one sin, one betrayal of our conscience or one compromise with Church teaching can easily become a spark that starts a spiritual forest fire. And so, when Jesus reaches out and touches this leper, and heals him, it is much more than just another miracle. It is a revelation of Christ's entire mission. **Jesus is the Redeemer, the Saviour; he is the one who comes into this fallen, sin-infected world and, with the power of his mercy and grace, cleanses it and gives it a new start. And he does this with each one of our lives, as often as we need it. Jesus came, and he still comes, not to condemn, but to save.**

In the Gospel, St. Mark (1:40-45) points out that Jesus cured the leper by touching him. Yes, physically touching him! But Jesus was all-powerful. There are times in the Gospels where he performs a miracle simply with a word, or even just with an unspoken desire. A word or a wave of his hand would surely have done the trick, fulfilled the law, and been a lot more pleasant than touching the putrid flesh of this smelly outcast. And yet, Jesus does touch him. **Jesus goes beyond what is strictly necessary because he wants to show us that his love is super-abundant. Jesus touched that leper for our sake, just as he suffered the scourging, the crowning with thorns, the way of the cross, and his long, excruciating crucifixion for our sake.** He knows that it is hard for us to trust him, but He longs to forgive us, save us, give us a fresh start, as often as we need it, if only we will give him the chance. **None of our hidden leprosy surprises or repel him; he knows us too well; he loves us unconditionally to the extreme.**

But following Christ's example of physically touching the leper is hard for us. Yet it's the only way to experience the wisdom, meaning, and joy that comes from spiritual maturity. Understanding why it's so hard for us is a big step towards making it a lot easier. There are at least two reasons. The first comes from original sin. We live in a fallen world and suffer from a fallen human nature. And so we have a built-in tendency to be self-centred instead of other-centred. The second reason is the culture in which we live. A consumerist culture like to measure success not by wisdom, Christ-like love, and holiness as God does, but by money, good looks, popularity, comfort, or office size. We divide people into "us" and "them", thus

rejecting people based on race, religion, culture, language, gender, ability. This is the root of what St. John Paul II calls the "**culture of death.**" This is why popular culture rejects the elderly, the disabled and children born deformed with rare diseases such as Down syndrome, Angelman syndrome ... Some pregnant women choose abortion if they know of abnormalities with the life inside their womb. They consider them "lepers". The sad part is that they don't realize the world is changing. There are many rare disease patient advocacy organizations in 80+ countries worldwide leading efforts in their respective countries to coordinate activities, to raise awareness, to improve access to treatment and medical representation for families and individuals with rare diseases. Events are organized by the local foundations for families to share their failures and successes in raising these children. Though in the past many restaurants and cinemas do not allow families with rare disease kids because they are too messy and too noisy, now more and more restaurants volunteer to allocate private seatings for the families and cinemas are setting special days to welcome them.

So, is there any hope for us to follow Christ's example to touch and love the "lepers" of our time? Of course! **Jesus himself is our hope. He dwells in every Christian heart, redeeming our fallen nature and strengthening us against evil influences. Let's promise that this week we will put that life to good use, by doing our part to treat others as Christ treats us.**

Wednesday February 17 is **Ash Wednesday**, the beginning of the **40 days Lenten Season** not including Sundays (that means the season is technically 46 days long). In the Gospel reading of Ash Wednesday, Jesus' clear words of warning, repeated three times (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21), are that we are **not to be like the hypocrites with regards to our almsgiving, prayer and fasting or other Christian behaviours.** When Jesus says "hypocrite," he is referring to actors whose outward actions don't match the content of their heart. During the COVID pandemic we wear masks to protect ourselves. Unfortunately sometimes we also wear "mask" during good times like the hypocrites. We say we want to live like Jesus, and yet we go around acting differently. Don't worry about the public face we put on. Concern ourselves only with God's view of us. There is no need pretending with God. God knows everything. God knows our hidden thoughts, motives, desires. **God not only knows the real us, God loves the us behind the mask.**