

LEPERS IN OUR LIVES: 6TH SUNDAY B

Brian Gleeson CP

I guess some of you have seen the movie *'Shine'* starring Geoffrey Rush. It tells the amazing story of the successful concert pianist, David Helfgott. Early on, even as he improves as a piano-player, he falls into a serious mental illness and starts to disintegrate as a person. He is suffering from manic depression. His moods keep swinging from the bright heights of elation, joy and excitement to the black depths of sadness, loneliness and despair. Very soon he loses his job, his home, his family, and is placed in a mental hospital. His psychiatrist even bans him from playing the piano. He ends up feeling acute pain, the pain of feeling worthless, hopeless, rejected and isolated. He is suffering all the symptoms of a social leper.

One day a woman named Gillian comes to visit one of the other patients at the hospital. Having been a long-time fan of his music, she sees David mooching around and recognises him. She says in the movie, *'at once I knew what the rest of my life would be about'*. She takes him into her home, looks after him, and takes on responsibility for his recovery. Bit by bit he gets better, and with the help of medicine, he is able to control his mood swings. Most importantly to them both he returns to playing the piano. Soon he is on the concert platform again, and his performances to exuberant and enthusiastic audiences around the world are a personal triumph.

Of course it's only a film. But its story really happened through the providence of God and the love of a good woman. It's a story too that is still happening because David Helfgott continues to enchant concert audiences.

His story is an extension of the message of Jesus in the Word of God today, which is about accepting and welcoming the broken, the despised, the rejected, the odd bods, the misfits, and the outcasts into our company and community, and about offering them help and healing by our openness and generosity. In fact Jesus challenges us to go out of our way to make contact with outcasts in the way that he put himself out to befriend that poor leper of our gospel story.

As a leper, the man was barred from going to the temple. He was not allowed to associate with others in any way. He was not allowed to even see his family or friends. If anyone came anywhere close he had to warn them by shouting *'Unclean! Unclean!'*

Since today we don't usually run into anyone with physical leprosy, we might identify at least some of those who are often treated as social lepers in society. Who would they include? Let me suggest the following: - Persons with AIDS; alcoholics; drug addicts; neurotics; mentally ill persons; the very fat; the disfigured; the odd dressers; gays and lesbians; the handicapped; and the homeless. At times the outcasts of society include persons with dementia; teenagers; asylum-seekers and refugees;

Immigrants; those who speak different languages; and. believe it or not, sometimes even the elderly.

We can work out who we would consider outcasts by asking ourselves who do we regard as not being our kind of people. Who would we avoid? Who would we shun? Who would we not want to be seen with or mix with? Who would we leave off our Invitations to parties?

By contrast, it was said of Jesus, that great mixer with all kinds of people - high and low, rich and poor, successful or so-called '*losers*', influential or ordinary: '*This man welcomes outcasts and [even] eats with them.*'

His care, kindness, welcome, compassion, forgiveness, generosity and healing-touch towards outsiders come through loudly and clearly in all the details of today's story of his meeting with the leper. He not only healed the man of his hideous and embarrassing skin disease, but he also healed him of his social isolation by bringing him back to his friends, family and community.

Today Jesus is challenging me to rethink and alter my attitudes, my judgments, and my behaviour, towards all kinds of people who are different from me. What about yourselves? Do you find him challenging you too?

bgleesoncp@gmail.com