

On the road of life, we are all seekers, and at times, while we can lose sight of what ultimately matters most and what true happiness is, the truth is that Jesus is always seeking us out. For on the outside while we often look like all is well, to borrow from John Lennon, the one thing we can't hide from God is that we are all indeed crippled inside.

Odds are you have never heard of Max Jacob. A gifted poet and painter, he had the good luck and misfortune to live in a circle of geniuses. The circle formed itself around Pablo Picasso, whom Jacob met in Paris in 1901. Jacob called this meeting the most important event of his life.

Jacob was born in 1876 in the province of Brittany in the town of Quimper. His family was Jewish though they did not really practice the faith much. They were shopkeepers, and actually the only Jews in town.

As a teenager, Max was not all that happy. He did not care for his mother, he pitied his father, and he just wanted to get out of the house. And so at the age of 18, he made his way to Paris. He went to law school ever so briefly, but fell in love with a Bohemian lifestyle. This was the era that came to be known as Modernism in the cultural realm of writing and music and

painting. Picasso was inventing a new art form called Cubism, a new way of seeing the world. His other friends that he'd meet included poets and musicians and dancers and writers. Max himself was determined to become an artist, but he had a hard time deciding between poetry, music and painting. He'd support himself by sketching portraits and giving lessons in piano and French.

The night life also included living as he wanted which included alcohol and drugs. He also drifted in and out of relationships that were short term, being attracted to a gay lifestyle. When he was broke, he cast horoscopes and hired himself out to rich people who wanted him to ensure that their parties would not be boring. He wasn't making much money, but he was happy - or so he thought.

Then one night in the fall of 1909, Max Jacob had a vision. And were it not for this vision, which was an encounter of a man who was deeply crippled inside with his Lord, he would have remained a rather obscure writer. that evening, he entered his apartment and beheld a vision of Jesus as a young boy - an apparition that gave dramatic coloring to the rest of his life and works. In his own words:

I put down my book bag and fetched my slippers. When I raised my head, there was someone on the wall! There was someone! There was someone on the wallpaper! My body fell to the floor! I was completely undone, as if struck by lightning. Oh, imperishable instant! Oh, truth! Truth! That celestial body was on the wall of my meager room! Why, Lord! Oh, forgive me! He was in a landscape I had sketched long ago ... but Him! What beauty, elegance and sweetness! His shoulders, his bearing! He wore a robe of yellow silk with blue trim. He turned around and I saw his peaceful and shining face.

As he put it God had intoxicated him. But the process to conversion wasn't smooth; it took him 6 years to be baptized. His friends did not know what to make of the conversion and his desire to become Catholic. A number of priests who he approached even doubted his sincerity; one thought Max was mocking him. But he kept hunting, going into Catholic churches, and reading theological books. However keeping the same friends led him to succumb to the same temptations that he'd always battled. When he had a second vision in 1914, he sought baptism with greater resolve and found a caring priest from an order founded for the conversion of Jews, Notre-

Dame de Sion. His godfather was Pablo Picasso, who gave him a copy of "The Imitation of Christ" as a baptism gift.

The vision led to the journey and now the baptism, but more work remained. He realized that his life as a Christian would be difficult if he lived in Paris with all the temptations. So in 1921 he left the capital for a small village town, and spent all of his remaining days in proximity to the Abbaye Fleury, and he would spend almost all of his remaining days in prayer with the Benedictines. "This is the only place," he said, "where I can live without sinning seriously every day of my life." His many friends in the worlds of art and literature would visit him there, where conversations that began on art, poetry, or cinema would always end on religion and in prayer. Jacob became famous for his letters and spiritual advice to friends, students, and acquaintances. He was especially known for his many hours a day at Mass and in prayer as well as his works of charity. He was a lay associate at the monastery from 1921 to 1928 and 1936 to 1944. As for the years he was away, one of his remarks preserved in a book called "The Aesthetics of Max Jacob," talks about a saint who is expelled from a monastery and asks God why that would be. He said God replied, "So that you could found your own monastery." He never founded his own monastery, but Jacob certainly

had some spiritual charisms, albeit mixed with contradictions. He knew at times he could be a hypocrite, but he was sincere in trying to become better, arguing correctly belief does not make one immune from temptation and weakness. When people were skeptical of his religion because of his lifestyle, Jacob liked to quip that he believed in confession, which wipes away sins. During the worst days of the Nazi Occupation, he sent relief packages to Jewish friends at the internment camp at Drancy, thereby handing the Gestapo a road map to his location.

Apart from the devotional writing that occupied much of his later life, Jacob's works consist mostly of plays, essays, and prose poems. He is today considered a link between two equally difficult schools of literature—the symbolists and the surrealists. As such, his more obscure works will never have broad appeal. However, he did write a large number of simpler, devotional poems that retain his typical love for word games, puns, and surprises. One was called Past and Present:

PAST AND PRESENT

Poet and tenor
Oriflamme to the North
Of death I sing.

Poet and drum
Colliour I'm from
Of love I sing.

Poet and mariner
Pour me some wine
Pour! pour! I disclose
What the algae knows.
Poet and Christian
Christ is my store
I'll say nothing more.

The poem is a short synopsis of his life, both real and imagined; as one writer put it, Always a poet and raconteur, he enjoys the role of mariner and invites us to buy him a drink. And why not? When you get a sailor to drinking, he might just divulge his greatest secret—the location of a sunken treasure. But, in the end, Jacob reveals that the only treasure he has ever discovered is Christ. He feared Hell, but he wrote in another poem the river of his life has become a lake, and what it reflects is nothing but Love. Love of God, Love in God.

On February 24, 1944, Jacob served the early morning Mass in the crypt of the church. At eleven o'clock, the Germans, who had already seized his sister and brother-in-law, finally caught up with Max. As he took leave of his parish priest, Jacob is reported to have said: "I give thanks to God for the martyrdom that begins now." Less than two weeks later, he died of pneumonia at Drancy. On his death bed, he asked his Jewish friends for a Christian burial—"you see, I have given my life to that Passion"—in words that only his Christian friends could have fully understood. He died of pneumonia on March 4, 1944 at Drancy, a camp where Nazis held Jews before transferring them to Auschwitz and other concentration camps in the east. A petition was drawn up to save him; Picasso, upon learning of his friend's capture said "Max is an angel and will fly over the walls."

His influence lives on today though; Jacob's literary works have undergone a considerable rediscovery since 1994, the 50th anniversary of his death. Jacob the mystic and visionary is also increasingly an object of lively attention. Some in France have spoken of miracles attributed to Jacob; testimonies have been collected and prayers offered in hope of his canonization.

What makes his story so powerful to me is that Jacob is someone we can all relate to; a great person to think about as we prepare to begin our Lenten journey, a man of contradictions who is a sinner-saint; trying to better his life, but struggling along the way. As he said “I don’t agree with myself. I struggle against myself, against my heart, against everything.” But eventually he learned not to just give up, but realized that he was not in that struggle alone.

In our Gospel this week, continuing from the first chapter of Mark, we read of Jesus reading out to the leper. And there’s a few important takeaways.

One is the nature of Christ; Jesus is seeking out those who are in pain and need. The leper is a contagious figure who is excluded from the community; a leper would cry out “unclean” if anyone came close. And so Jesus touches the man, becoming ritually unclean Himself. God is so loving, and so it’s important to open our eyes like that priest did who baptized Jacob, and not be like the others in the Church who ignored him. Who are the people in our lives who are on the margins? The people in need? The materially poor yes, but as a people called to serve, we need to

see the lepers around us; the people who are hurting, who are alone, who are stuck in the abyss of self-hate or sins that they can't seem to overcome and give them hope.

Secondly, we ask ourselves how are we like that leper? Sometimes like Jacob, we feel like one inside. At times a person struggles to believe that they are loved; they see themselves as having sinned and done bad things and just kind of live with it, or give in. I think of what my moral theology professor said one day in class; Jesus never looks at someone and thinks of them as dirty or unclean. Rather God is all love. And no matter what we've done, God is waiting for us like He was with Jacob. At times we can compare ourselves with the so-called "holy" people; or go through moments where we think of our shortcomings or people we've let down. We cannot change the past. But we can look at ourselves and see what needs fixing, and say those words of the leper, I wish to be made clean. That is Jesus; so don't wallow in shame or cling to guilt, but let go, and let God.

Lastly, note what Jacob did - he still wrote and lived, but he recognized changes needed to be made. He got away from places where he was more prone to sin. He lived at the monastery. He surrounded himself with people

who could help him. He went to Mass. On a spiritual level, we can look at the leper being healed and being now able to walk and speak vs being bent over. Just as physical disease harms the body and changes it for the worse, sin does that to the soul; and the medicine is grace, which we need continually. It's why Jacob went to Mass and prayed daily and helped people in need during World War II that ultimately cost him his life. As Lent begins, what better time to re-commit ourselves to that continual work-ethic to look at what causes us to sin, or to get back to a prayer routine, and daily striving to grow with God's help. We will inevitably have setbacks, but we look at what needs to be done and with God, get to work to overcoming these battles and not giving up.

So much of our lives we keep in secret; but God does indeed know we are crippled inside, from our choices, from life, from being away from Mass because of a schedule. Through this though is God reaching out. So let us use our Lenten journey and indeed the journey of our lives to be made clean; to let go and let God; and, with him, reach out to the lepers in our lives so they too can be made clean and find true happiness. Life is hard, and how easy it is to just gradually become lost and impacted by our life choices and situations and at best, ignore them through distractions and at

worst give up and become depressed. But in this, is hope - a Savior reaching out who wishes to make us clean and whole. Let's not fear taking the hand of the God who is with us, trusting that His love will make us whole.