

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Leprosy

New versions of the Bible seem to have decided not to use the word “leper” any more. The new Jerusalem Bible uses “person suffering from a virulent skin-disease”. I’m old-fashioned, and I use the word “leper”- not as a term of abuse, but with exactitude (meaning a person suffering from a virulent skin-disease), because I think it conveys a range of meanings and emotions which relate me to the time of Jesus and the time of Elisha. What should we carry forward from those medically dark times?

Loneliness

The understanding of contagion was very primitive in ancient times. Leprosy is, I’m told, not comparatively very contagious. But it was rightly feared. It was a long-survived disease, where the visible decay of the face and the extremities was unaccompanied by any decay of the mind. You had to watch the progress of your disease with clear eyes. You also had to endure tremendous isolation, losing the people you loved and your home. It is therefore a powerful image of innocent suffering.

Incurability

In biblical times leprosy was incurable, and the sort of obvious physical decay it caused made it an appalling image of everything that defaces and degrades us, that we cannot help. Today it is possible to halt the disease and offer genuine cure. Then, it was the dreaded life-sentence, the archetypal impasse. It is therefore an image of defeat, of doom.

Humanity

There’s much about being human that looks very similar. We need one another so badly, and yet we never feel completely sure of our belonging. We might live in dread of others, who may abuse us or rob us or exploit our weakness. Some people despair of ever trusting others, and purposely isolate themselves as securely as the ancient leper, sometimes trying to deny their need or dependence. Some feel unworthy to ask others to be interested in them, and live in a terrible friendlessness, cold and dark. Furthermore, for every form of mental suffering, there is always the ultimate weakness of the body. How can something so capable of happiness be at the same time so vulnerable to suffering? Life with the human

body is always provisional, and is formally incurable, totally mortal! Some of us know this with the same awful clarity as the leper of old, and many respond by feeling paralysed by this knowledge. Accompanying one another, we all come close to death several times before we face it in ourselves. Whilst this can make us feel that we are coming closer to the truth, and perhaps gaining a wiser perspective on life because we know death more clearly, still we feel that death is “a deep dishonour” to our human dignity. And if we try to ignore it, and build a frame of mind that leaves it out of account, we come to be haunted by it. Truth, as they say, will out.

Healing Leprosy

Jesus’ cure of the ten lepers would have required no label in Biblical times for it to be recognised as miraculous. It is unique in the tenfold healing, and only Luke tells the story. But it isn’t the greatness of the healing power, nor the simple lesson of gratitude, that is the point. Luke tells the story for the simple reason that it shows a foreigner - or as Luke chooses to call him, an *alien* - deciding to return *to Jesus* in order to give glory *to God*. One could hardly complain of the behaviour of the other nine. They are going -in obedience not only to Jesus, but to Moses - to the priests in Jerusalem, where their healing will be recognised, celebrated with a sacrifice, and certificated by the proper authorities and in accordance with the Scriptures. For the Samaritan, who has “found himself healed”, there is no such duty and no such forum for the celebration of the miracle. For him, there is only one place for the greatness of what has happened to be duly honoured: he returns to Jesus, and does before him what the other nine will do in the Temple: he throws himself at the feet of the one who heals him. This is a religious posture, reserved for the presence of the divine. Surely the others are as grateful as he, just as jubilant; the Gospel is not about gratitude, but about worship. It is the outsider, the one who would anyway have been an outsider, an alien, who comes back *to Jesus* in a posture of worship. This will be the story of the New Testament, the theme of Luke’s next volume, the Acts of the Apostles. The Chosen in the Promised Land will be the last to acknowledge the Christ. *Fr Philip*