

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Has The Penny Dropped?

Leprosy makes a particularly powerful metaphor for the human condition, and especially for the reality of sin. For a leper in Biblical times, death lives in the body like a squatter who is gradually tearing your house down. Little by little the deformity spreads, eating away facial features, reducing hands and feet to twisted and useless stumps, inflicting the whole skin with deathly pallor. Socially it is even more disastrous. Your ritual visit to the priest culminates in a summary sentence, not only of disfigurement and death, but of the loss of family, friends, and home, the immediate beginning of a precarious life beyond the fringes of security. The worst of it is that the disease leaves the mind unimpaired, so that the sufferer is compelled to watch the process unfolding with merciless clarity.

Translation Of The Above

How should we understand “leprosy” in our reading of the Gospel? Hansen’s disease, Biblical leprosy, can now be arrested and expelled, and with early diagnosis its threat is very limited. It is not as contagious as used to be feared, and it is any case quite slow in progress. We have to translate the theme of leprosy into modern terms before we can hear the message of the Gospel clearly. The temptation is to turn to a modern disease like AIDS, but that disease, certainly in our part of the world, is not regarded as so universal a threat as leprosy was. I would sooner think of something much more general, such as *old age* or even *death* itself - the last great taboo, which everyone knows about and no-one mentions. The time and money we devote to concealing the signs of age is wonderful. Never have we so much worshipped youth (*wasted on the young*, some cynic said) and undervalued age; yet ageing and death are certainties and have to be included in any mature outlook on life. They come upon us inexorably, with great authority: and our grasp on life and selfhood has to make some kind of answer to them. I suppose leprosy is also natural, being part of the way the world is. So is death; but we still feel that such a contradiction of a human being is not consistent with the rest of the picture; there is something about it merciless, blind, and indiscriminate; indeed, the surprising thing about death is how very impassively it proceeds; so very humble, so lacking in grandeur, as simple as putting out a light. Anyone who has watched a loved one die will know what I mean. There is no concession for sensitivity, or for the preciousness of the life that ebbs away. It is sometimes as harsh as murder.

The Tenth Leper

To hear the Gospel today we have to make room for something unfashionable: the idea of an organic link between disease and sin. This can result in huge injustice if it is wrongly-conceived; our suffering isn’t proportionate to our sinfulness - we know many sinners in rude health, and many saints whose life is appalling. But the Scripture seems to know by a deep instinct that leprosy is somehow *connected to* the unredeemed state of a sinful world. Our realisation that *everyone who suffers is of significance to us* is connected to this Biblical insight. Some people do not let it sway them from their selfishness; but, for most, the sight of suffering evokes compassion and a sense of responsibility, a readiness to rearrange one’s life, to make time to help, to share resources. The *isolation* of the lepers is what Jesus breaks, building a bridge for them back to the human family. The point about the tenth leper is that for him the penny drops, and he sees that he has been healed and reconciled *by Jesus*: therefore it is to Jesus that he returns - not only to give thanks, but to worship: *he threw himself at the feet of Jesus*. If we know Luke, we are not surprised to hear that *the man was a Samaritan*. Luke knows that the very status of dispossession, the very fact of being an outsider, can create the seedbed of faith; *where are the other nine?* can be answered by looking up the Jewish Law: they’ve gone obediently to Jerusalem, to show themselves to the priests. Jesus too is *on his way to Jerusalem* to fulfil the Law; but he will do this as a crucified outcast from the Law. His “showing himself to the priests” will be his trial and condemnation; and that will be an *epiphany*, a showing-forth of God’s glory, to priests and people, and this will save all lepers, all sinners, all mortals at once.

Find Your Incurability

It is when you have identified the place where you are incurably damaged, unable to fulfil your life, irreparably short of your hopes, that you can, as it were, inherit this Gospel of the leper, and understand where it is that you have the possibility of coming to Christ as this Samaritan does, to offer him your worship. *Fr Philip*