

Leprosy, despite the terror of its name, has for a long time now been relegated to the ranks of curable diseases. We have by the kindness of God and the efforts of science drawn the teeth of a terrible scourge. Let us try to think of the parallel in our times to the image of leprosy in the time of Jesus. We seek the image of something incurable, which makes someone's life impossible, unviable, compromised and - ahead of actual death - terminated.

The simple answer would be to go to incurable sickness, perhaps to think of inoperable cancer. Let us examine the parallel.

It *sometimes* answers the criterion of incurability. In spiritual terms there is a distant echo of isolation: a cancer patient may pass through a feeling which sees the disease as a personal infliction, a feeling of isolation. But a short reconsideration recalls us to reality. Cancer isn't always incurable: certainly not untreatable. The NHS pays out a great part of its budget in treating and including cancer patients. Indeed, if you find yourself suffering an equally terminal heart condition, you will soon see how different your treatment and support system are from those of the cancer-patient next door. *She* will receive constant therapy, counselling, and the offer of hospice services: the heart-patient will receive very little of these things, and will feel much more alone. Also, there's a vast movement of searching for treatments and palliative techniques for cancers of all sorts. Oncology is a story of miracles and of renewed hopes. Cancer no longer means sudden death. But more to the point, it no longer means ostracism, it no longer makes you a non-person; if anything, your cancer will fast-track you into the sympathy and care of multitudes of people. It is emphatically not the new leprosy.

How about HIV-Aids? It's better as a parallel, because there is already about AIDS the cachet of rejection from mainstream society. It is linked in people's minds with promiscuity, or with deviant sexuality - often without any truth: babies have AIDS; it is better as a parallel than cancer. But there is a similar medical story here too: there are scientific campaigns to find effective treatments, there is much hope. People have compassion and sympathy; the isolation is not the same as that of the leper.

Shocking as it may seem, I would seek the likeness of leprosy in the lot of the paedophile. Here is a condition which ostracises, which may technically be acknowledged as a disease, but which is known to be beyond cure. Here is an exact parallel of helplessness: where can they be put, to make the rest of the community safe? Above all, there is the mingled horror and ignorance which despair of positive understanding, which recoil in total repugnance, utter rejection. What is an undoubted sickness of crippled emotions lays its sufferers open to the hatred and violence of others: the nightmare scenes of mobs surrounding or torching houses, and the seeming incapacity of anyone to offer a just answer, evoke the stoning of the leper.

If we accept the parallel, we should accept also the lesson of Jesus. "If you want to, you can cure me" suddenly takes on the vivid and dramatic aura of a true act of faith. And the response of the Lord is instantaneous: *Of course I want to. Be cured!* Our aspiration to seek for healing must draw no bounds around the needy brothers and sisters we look out on a wounded world. But *paedophiles*? Is no-one, then, beyond the pale? *Indeed, no-one.* Are we not permitted to declare an unforgivable sin? *No, if you want the mercy of God for your sins, you must not impede it for others.* What about my phrase in these horrific places: *God may forgive you: but I can't?* Ah, there's the nub of the matter! In the heart of us is that irreducible refusal to be divine, the tiny reservoir where we cling to our enslavement to evil: because the refusal to forgive is as damning a fault as the sin itself, and imprisons the victim as surely as it paralyses the sinner. If the presence of an incurable evil has anything to teach us, it is that we have to unlock that vice in the heart where we endeavour to trap the fingers of the sinful Adam or Eve. We rightly separate ourselves from the sin; but if we desert and abandon the sinner, we lose our likeness to God and, along with it, all our hopes.

Homily

Where is leprosy today? In the cancer ward? No
In the AIDS ward? Better....but not quite
In the prison, in the E wing where the paedophiles are

Jesus reaching out to touch the leper
Jesus accepts the isolation and loneliness he has healed for the leper

This whole drama can be lived out within your own personality
the isolation and rejection we suffer
isolation from our own self
the acceptance and tolerance we need
these are the wellspring of healing and acceptance for others.

Jesus lived in the love of the Father. He loved not only the outcast world
but also the world's outcasts.

By uniting himself to us in our alienation and incurability
he accepted crucifixion.

Could Jesus get himself crucified today by healing lepers?

But suppose he asked us to befriend paedophiles?