

Every Sunday the first reading from the Old Testament has the same theme as the gospel. Today it's leprosy. Leprosy was the great scourge and great fear of the ancient world and it was thought to be highly contagious: but in fact we know that it isn't.

But look at the difference between the two readings.

The Book of Leviticus says the suspected leper must show himself to the priest, tear his garments and disorder his hair and – in case anyone still didn't get the message – he had to cry 'Unclean!' and live outside the camp. But one-and-a-half thousand years after Leviticus was compiled, Jesus actually takes the leper by the hand and touches him. He was considered ritually unclean – so too were the woman with a flow of blood and the dead body of the widow of Nain's son – but Jesus touches all three out of heartfelt pity.

The two readings today contrast two different attitudes to the leper – one of repulsion and dread, the other of loving compassion. Actually, the bottom line is that it's a contrast between Jesus and the law. I think that this still afflicts the Church today: the law of the Church says one thing: the heart of Jesus clearly says another.

It also asks us to think about ourselves. Are there some individuals or groups of people that we would rather avoid, or instinctively shun, or turn away from, because we regard them as 'dirty', or impure, or unclean? It can be extremely subtle – so subtle we might not even be aware of it – but if

there are, then we treating them as Leviticus taught the tribe how to treat lepers.

In Leviticus it was for self-protection, of course – that was why so many rules about diet, hygiene and health were written down: the tribe, desert nomads, had to be protected at all costs from the dangers of food-poisoning, disease, and so on. That's why those rules mean almost nothing to us today. However, sometimes we are capable of treating others like lepers to protect ourselves, even if it virtually is invisible on the outside. I've certainly been capable of it. A leper is anyone whom we consider to be a social nuisance, or guilty of some shameful misdemeanour, or someone whose presence in the community is undesirable, unedifying, embarrassing or causes us guilt. For most of us the list isn't terribly long, but there *is* a list. The gospel would have us reach out our hand to that person and touch them, as the Lord did.

This has nothing to do with sentimentality. It's not spiritual kitsch. It is totally demanding.

St Francis of Assisi had a particular fear of lepers and he forced himself to kiss and embrace a poor man with leprosy. He said it took him every ounce of his courage, all the heroism he could muster, but he did it. And at that moment he knew the leper was Christ. He saw that it was.

That's an impossible act to follow, but as the old mystical Jewish saying goes: 'You are not expected to succeed. But neither must you abandon the task.'