

The first reading today and the gospel – which are usually thematically connected every Sunday – are about leprosy and lepers. This is a disease which was dreaded and loathed in the ancient world and for a long time afterwards; it is only in fairly recent times that it was understood to be far less infectious than was once thought. In the Middle Ages lepers – who had usually become infected with the disease overseas – were isolated in hospitals specially built in remote, rural areas. There was a 12th century leper hospital in Colchester, for example. In the 19th century it took eleven years for Fr Damien of Molokai to contract leprosy from those he cared for in his leper colony in Hawaii. In our age, Diana, Princess of Wales, was Patron of the Leprosy Mission and in November 1993 famously shook hands, without gloves, with a young leprosy sufferer.

The proscriptions given in the first reading from the Book of Leviticus show us with what horror and fear leprosy was regarded: the leper's clothing had to be torn and his hair uncombed, he had to 'shield his upper lip' – which probably means covering his mouth in some way – and warning people of his approach. He was also to live outside the camp in

isolation. The Book of Leviticus – which, I feel confident in saying, none of us would use for private devotion – is the third book of the Pentateuch and, as such, is considered to come directly from Moses, although it probably didn't reach its present form until somewhere between the 5th and 3rd centuries BC – a thousand years after Moses was said to have lived. Leviticus is not so much a work of history or theology as a book of instructions on how the people were to live, especially in regard to diet, hygiene, ritual and moral purity. These instructions above all were designed to protect the health and wellbeing of the tribe.

All this is poignantly resonant in our times, the times in which Covid-19 presently reigns supreme. We, too, must 'shield our upper lip' and mask our nose and mouth; we must isolate ourselves, away from the community if we have been in the presence of an infected person, we don't have to warn others of our approach but we do have to keep six feet away from them and, these days, most of us tend instinctively to cross to the opposite side of the street when others are heading our way. We may not shake hands or hug, we are kept away from family and friends, our social gatherings are

severely restricted or completely forbidden. Our collective attitude to Covid-19 is probably of the same kind as the ancient and medieval attitude to leprosy: essentially fearful; although they did not have the medical understanding to know it, their precautions were not warranted. Now we do have the right knowledge, and we know that our precautions are.

Of course, as always, there is another aspect to all of this – and it is not fear but *love* in the presence of the leper. In today's gospel Jesus did not hesitate to reach out and physically touch the leper with his hand; we can be sure that the people with him stood a long way off. He would also have been considered ritually unclean himself, but that kind of thing never seemed to bother him. A traditional story is told of St Francis of Assisi, that most Christlike man, who – typically for his time – had a great fear and abhorrence of lepers. One day, however, he met a man afflicted with leprosy while riding his horse near Assisi. Though the sight of the leper filled him with horror and disgust, Francis got off his horse and embraced the man. Then the leper put out his hand, hoping to receive something. Out of compassion,

Francis gave him some money. But when Francis mounted his horse again and looked all around, he could not see the leper anywhere. It dawned on him that it was Christ whom he had just embraced. I do not believe that this story is fanciful, or simply an illustrative legend about a universally loved saint; it strikes me as absolutely authentic and a genuine example of the kind of man Francesco Bernadone must have been. We note carefully that St Francis did not *lose* his horror and disgust of the leper – it didn't miraculously go away – but he embraced him anyway.

What is it within ourselves that fills us with disgust? It may seem a fashionably psychological thing to say, but it remains true: there is a leper within each one of us, whom we keep carefully masked and isolated. Yet this leper too, must be touched and embraced, if it is to be healed. We don't have to like our inner leper – just accept it as belonging to us. It could be anything: the leprosy of gossip and scandal-mongering, of sexual waywardness or weakness, of racism, jealousy and envy, or the unwillingness to forgive.

The Anglican writer and mystic Martin Israel said this:

“We should really love ourselves in our entirety and not in any way ignore those facets of our character which are disagreeable. Self-knowledge does not flinch from any experience or attitude, no matter how unpleasant, or even criminal, it may be. If a person accepts it generously as a part of his or her own character, it is gradually transfigured into something quite beautiful.” (...) “It is not wrong to envy or even hate someone, so long as we are aware of its impropriety and, in silence, give it to God. This is in fact the nature of prayer itself. The end of our growth as individuals is wholeness, to be not so much good, as complete and whole.”

Yesterday, Saturday morning, I went for my first Covid-19 jab – and I learned a great deal from the experience. I saw the opposite of fear: I saw love – because the opposite of love is not hate, it is fear. Oh, the stewards, the volunteers, the hand sanitisers, the name-and-address checkers, the nurses telling you what was about to happen and those giving the jabs – none of these people, I don't think, would say that what they were doing was the working out of love, but it absolutely was. It was both surreal and moving. It was human beings working together for their own wellbeing

against an impersonal common enemy. Disease and illness is always a great leveller: it doesn't care what your social status is, or how much money you have, or how powerful you are, or how young and beautiful – to be overcome and defeated, it needs humanity to work together for the common good. It's just such a pity that it takes a worldwide pandemic to get us to realise that.