

SERMON, 9 OCTOBER 2022 - 2 TIM 2.8-15, LUKE 17.11-19



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As Jesus entered a village, ten lepers approached him. We all know what leprosy is - we've seen it in films (I am thinking of the 1959 version of Ben Hur). I looked the disease up:

Leprosy is a mildly infectious disease associated with poverty. It is easily cured. Leprosy starts by damaging the small nerves on the skin's surface resulting in a loss of sensation.

Without the gift of pain, everyday activities are fraught with danger. Unnoticed burns and ulcers can lead to permanent disability. Due to the inability to detect grit in the eye, blindness is a common consequence of leprosy.



That is the introduction from The Leprosy Mission's website - I'd never thought of "the gift of pain" before. We may give thanks for the sensations in our fingers, the pleasure of touch - when did we last give thanks for the gift of pain, the warning when we touch something hot or sharp, and withdraw before we do more damage. We know the risk of damage, the risk of infection, and we know the damage that can do.

I was surprised The Leprosy Mission almost seem to play the disease down, "a mildly infectious disease ... easily cured" - that's not the image I have of leprosy. I don't suppose it was the image the people in the gospel story had, it isn't the image that people who live near those with leprosy have today. The main country affected is India, over 200,000 people were diagnosed with new cases last year - and the biggest problem is stigma. People are frightened, people will not seek treatment because of the stigma surrounding the disease - and yet it is easily cured. How sad.



In Jesus's time, in the days before treatment and medicine, it was a death sentence. The lepers were banished from society - given a rattle or a bell as a warning, made to stay away. In medieval England they remained outside the villages - watching the service in the church through a leper squint - unable to work, dependent on charity, feared. In Derbyshire we know the story of the village of Eyam - and we focus on the bravery, the sacrifice, not on the fear and suffering.

You can imagine the fear the disciples and the crowd around Jesus felt when they saw 10 lepers at a distance, heard them calling out. Did Peter and the fishermen - perhaps big burly blokes, hold their staves a bit more firmly, in case they had to use them. Did some of the others pick up stones, in case these lepers came too close?



“Jesus, Master, have mercy on us” - they need this man's help. There are no drugs, there is no health service, the only way they are going to get better is if a miracle healer works his miracle on them - and they have heard that Jesus is a healer. They will come to him, they will risk the shouts and the sticks and the stones - they need this.

Jesus doesn't touch, he doesn't pray over them, he doesn't sit them down and teach them - just “go and show yourself to a priest.”

I was wondering how I'd feel if there was a ring at the Vicarage door and ten people stood there saying, “hello, we were lepers, but we think we've been cured. The Law says you've got to check.” Fortunately, not part of my job

description - though there are others who turn up occasionally who I can be afraid of.

As they go, they are healed - and one of them comes back to Jesus to say thank you. How dreadful - just the one, where are the other nine. We'll they've dashed to see the priest, then to see their wives, their children - and do we blame them? Let's be honest, that's probably the direction we'd have headed in.



I must admit, I didn't need this reading today. Signed off work because of cancer, unable to stand behind an altar and celebrate the Eucharist in my churches – though I didn't think that one of the blessings of zoom would be that I can keep doing something and feel I'm at least making myself a little useful.

Like everyone else who gets ill, I'm struggling. Why me? As I said to someone, I have never smoked, I have never drunk, I've hardly lived a life of sex, drugs and rock and roll – so why me? I've done almost 30 years as a priest, I've tried to lead two churches through a pandemic – so why me?

When Gareth was ill, I told myself that God didn't sit up there saying, "right I'll send illness there, I'll damage Gareth's heart and we'll see how the family cope" - illness is a result of the fact that this world is not the perfect world God created, there is disease, dis-ease. Logically I know that, but it doesn't always feel like that. If God is in charge, if God holds me in the palm of his hand, when it feels as if we've been dropped, He gets the blame - and at the moment I'm at that stage.



But in the darkness we find light. Hannah and I decided we'd go off on Thursday and find the Maggie's cancer centre in Nottingham. We drove to Toton Lane and got the tram to the QMC. We got onto the platform, and could see no mention of Maggie's on the hospital plan. Strange. We did a quick google, and it turns out Maggie's is at Nottingham City Hospital - I didn't know

there were two hospitals in Nottingham! We got back on the next tram, went through central Nottingham and jump on the bus at Wilkinson Street, the Medilink bus that takes you to the hospital.



Maggie's were very friendly, although it took them a moment to realise it was me with cancer and not Hannah, the lady in a wheelchair. There, gathered around a large kitchen table, were a wide variety of men and women – of many races, creeds and colours, and immediately seats were found, the kettle was on, biscuits were offered, and friendships made. A professional made time to sit with us and talk through how we were feeling, what our fears and our questions were, and they offered help and support – then and there and in the future. A real community, no judgement, no cost, just love and friendship and concern. Not a Christian organization, although my faith was affirmed (and the difficulties of having faith were acknowledged) – but if I want a dream of the Kingdom of God, that room in Maggie's is a pretty good picture.

Our anthem reminds us that we are held in God's hands

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQDU524YFFU>

### **Anthem – Oculi omnium**

*Words: Psalm 145.15*

*Music: Charles Wood, 1866-1926*

*Sung by St Edmundsbury Cathedral Choir*

Oculi omnium in Te sperant Domine  
et Tu das escam illorum in tempore opportuno.  
Gloria Tibi Domine. Amen.

The eyes of all wait upon thee, O Lord:  
and thou givest them their meat in due season.