

October 9, 2016 The Lepers Homily:

Brothers and sisters, while serving as an associate pastor of Sacred Heart Church in the mid 1980's the A.I.D.S. epidemic dominated the local and national news. Understandably, the severity of the crisis alarmed the American public. In addition, the fear of contagion was often crippling, having the unfortunate effect of stigmatizing anyone who suffered from the disease. I can still recall a heated controversy that arose locally after a proposal had been made to convert an abandoned house in the village of Waterford into a residence for patients afflicted with the deadly disease. Chaos then ensued. Given the fear of contagion, many residents of the village refused to entertain the possibility of someone with a life-threatening illness living close by. It is as if the people of the village protested in unison, "Keep out, stay away." One can only imagine the reaction of those who suffered from the disease, and were looking for a safe and hospitable shelter. Their bitter disappointment must have been obvious.

In Jesus' day leprosy was a social disease. Lepers were treated as the living (or walking) dead. Those suffering from leprosy were isolated in special camps outside the cities in an effort to contain the disease.

Perhaps you may recall "the valley of the lepers" in the award winning film, "Ben-Hur". After returning home after his captivity in slavery, Judah Ben-Hur learned that his beloved mother and sister were now lepers and in the notorious valley of the Lepers. In the mind of the prince, it was a fate worse than death. Nevertheless, he overcame his revulsion for leprosy, descended into the valley of the Lepers and entered into contact with those two women whom he loved dearly.

It is to be noted that in our Gospel reading today the ten men afflicted with leprosy did not draw close to Jesus. They "stood at a distance". (Lk.17:12) The law of Moses obliged them to do so. (In all likelihood, they stood some fifty yards from Christ.) And shouting from a distance, they begged the Savior's help. "Jesus, Master, have pity on us", (Lk.17:13) they cried. Now the only way a leper could be allowed to be returned to society was if, he or she, were declared clean (restored to health) by the priests.

One may ask why in the twenty-first century, we, who live in the affluent West, should be fixated on a disease that is no longer an existential threat in this age of modern medicine. The answer is that today leprosy can often go undetected! It has assumed different forms.

Consider: The student expelled from school for multiple infractions; the athlete suspended indefinitely for criminal behavior; the employee who loses his job and is told to vacate his office in a matter of hours; the student in school who is shunned by his classmates for whatever reason; the former priest who was justifiably removed from ministry because of his abuse of a child and is now banished from his priestly fraternity. They all are treated like lepers. We close our eyes or turn our face away from them. They are pariahs!

In the gospel reading, the Evangelist tells his readers that Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem. (Lk.17:11). Once in Jerusalem, Our Lord himself is treated with disdain by the Jewish leaders and eventually regarded as a "leper" by those who "stood at a distance", especially his own closest followers. If you, a healthy person, have ever been hurt by the insensitivity and cruelty of others, then you may have some appreciation of what the ten lepers experienced in the time of Jesus.

Amen!