

We've had three quite short readings this evening/morning, but with a punch that's worth looking at, to discover how these circumstances may still apply today.

Take the lepers in our first reading, for example, forced by the Law of Moses to live outside the community, dressed in rags, and when they did venture near uninfected people, forced to call out “unclean, unclean”, as a warning to them to keep a wide berth.

Today we know leprosy as a bacterial infection which can be treated with antibiotics, but at that time there was no such cure, and because leprosy has a long incubation period before it becomes obvious, people suspected all kinds of skin problems as symptoms of the disease, and would try to isolate sufferers until the real cause became evident. Any swelling, scabs, rashes, shiny spot would be suspected as symptoms of leprosy, and was prone to isolate people. Just imagine being driven out of town and away from your family for a case of eczema or ringworm. The safety of the community came first, and was protected by this law, - not the rights or interests of the individual.

Trouble is, most people did not die of these symptoms. But they could die, or at least languish in their separation from the community. Life outside the camp was haunted by hunger, lack of shelter, and a prey to wild beasts, added to which came the loneliness and having little energy to struggle and survive.

Thank God this Biblical form of leprosy is no longer a threat, but its social equivalent is still with us, where many people in our society are excluded, not welcome to sit at our tables, avoided in public places, and shunned for all the wrong reasons.

It's a situation St. Paul takes exception to in our second reading. It has come to his notice that in the Christian community in Corinth a two-tier structure of membership had developed, - the insiders and the outsiders. The insiders were generally well-off people with leisure, who could come early to the community celebrations, picked the best spots, had first choice at their meals, and were invited to join favoured committees. The outsiders were mostly working-class people and slaves, arriving later, had to make-do with the left-overs, cleaning up, and drafted into jobs no one else wanted.

St. Paul, in a finely controlled outrage, tells the Corinthians that such divisions have no place in the church, not at the Lord's Supper, and not among their membership. Everything they do, should give glory to God, and not offense, and there is no quicker way to offend God, than to cause harm to the least of the brothers and sisters.

The Gospel puts paid to such action with the story of the leper who is released from his isolation by Jesus, who willingly heals him, and with that restores him to the embrace of the community.

Jesus understood better than anyone else that people needed community more than they needed a cure for what ailed them. Often, in fact, community is the cure for what ails us. Think, for example, of refugees in detention camps, slowly going crazy because of the time it takes to check their status, or elderly people living alone with deteriorating health, because no one comes to visit them or to take an interest in them.

Jesus founded the Church on the idea of community. Right from the beginning he did not travel alone, nor did he send his disciples out in fewer than twos. He promised: “wherever two or more are gathered, there am I in the midst of them.” Being church is not a solo act. We need each other.

Jesus cures a lot of lepers in the Gospels, - maybe because there were so many of them, or maybe because their condition was a particular grief to him. Or maybe it was that lepers were the most aggressive seekers of a cure, since the penalty of exclusion was so unbearable.

Whatever the case, Jesus does not simply heal them, - but he also points them in the direction of the proper authorities who regulated their return to the community. He makes them his first Apostles, i.e. witnesses he sent to the religious leaders of the day, to announce that in Jesus God was present in their midst, and to invite them also to have faith in Him.

In a similar way now, it is real communities of caring and inclusion which facilitate the healing of those isolated today, and thereby are the greatest sign of God's presence among us.

Community is not an extra in our life of faith. It is essential, and at the heart of the matter.