

LEPERS THEN AND NOW: 28TH SUNDAY C

Who are the lepers in our society today, the ones who feel excluded, the ones who feel they don't belong, the ones who feel they are outsiders and not insiders? Let me offer some possibilities! People who are aborigines? People who are Sudanese? People who are immigrants without documents? People who are down on their luck and who need food vouchers to get by? People with a different sexual orientation? People who don't agree with us on war and other social and political issues? People who are divorced and re-married and don't feel comfortable in church? People suffering from AIDS?

There is a particularly close parallel between the Story of the Ten Lepers and the story of people with AIDS. Both groups of persons have endured hideous and repulsive symptoms. Both have been shunned by others. Both have been segregated from the healthy. Both have been condemned, ignored, belittled and humiliated. Both have needed the healing help that has come their way - from Jesus personally in the case of the Ten Lepers, from people like Jesus in the case of those suffering from AIDS. Another parallel is that Jesus did not let the question of how they became lepers stop him from helping and healing them. Neither should their carers let the question of how they contracted AIDS get in the way of their helping and healing.

Still another parallel may be presumed. Just as ten lepers were made clean but only one was grateful, it's unlikely that all AIDS sufferers are as grateful as they might be - to their doctors, nurses, families, friends and carers. It's more likely that some - if only a few - are so preoccupied with their pain, discomfort, loss of meaning and hope, that they simply forget to acknowledge the love and care, the help and relief that they receive. It's only human nature!

We, you and I, come into both of these stories. We may be very healthy, with healthy bodies and healthy sexuality. But are our attitudes completely healthy? How many AIDS patients do we know? How many would we be willing to know? For how many do we care? For how many would we be willing to care?

How much, if at all, do we think of AIDS as a terrible evil threatening life and health, meaning and happiness? Isn't it possible that some might even secretly view it as a just punishment from God on those who misbehave? And isn't it even possible that some may be secretly hoping that a cure for the disease will never be found?

We, you and I, come into the stories in another way. Ten were cleansed, ten were helped, ten were healed, ten were given back life, meaning and hope, but only one returned to thank Jesus, and did so loudly and enthusiastically. So, do you and I appreciate and acknowledge the good that is done to us and the good that is done for us? Or are we so self-centred, so wrapped up in our little selves that we actually neglect to say thanks and to show our appreciation for favours and kindnesses received?

Have you ever noticed children opening presents? They tear off the bows, the gift-wrap, and the cardboard, to go straight to the contents. They ignore the card that says where the present

came from. They have to be told: 'Say "thank-you" to Uncle Jim.' 'Give Auntie Jane a kiss.' We can excuse little ones for this, because they are not grown up. We others should know better and do better.

To our great credit, we have come together to the Eucharist to give thanks to God, 'from whom all blessings flow'. But when I see you praising and thanking God, I cannot but think of the words of Jesus: 'Were not all ten made whole?' Has not our entire parish been made whole in baptism? Were not hundreds of God's people in this place once connected to the person of Jesus Christ, and offered an ongoing and lifelong relationship with him? So 'where are the other nine?' Where are they? At other Masses, I hope- somewhere. For, just like you and me, having received so much from God through Jesus, how could anyone possibly stay away from this time of heartfelt thanks for life, health, happiness, meaning, purpose and fulfilment, the company of Jesus and of our fellow-Christians? To mention just a few of the blessings that flow from our good God day after day after day!

bgleesoncp@gmail.com