

Who Are the Lepers Today?

I read somewhere that workers at a dog pound in Zimbabwe suffered racist attacks – from some of the dogs that came into their care. Apparently a number of the animals that end up in the pound have been taught by their previous owners to fear or attack people of a particular skin colour. Dogs are branded black or white not according to the colour of their coat, but in accordance with the type of owner they will befriend and trust.

I mention this to show how our human prejudices and hatreds can infect and embed themselves into the very environment in which we live. So called institutional racism is a good example. If I understand it correctly this is where certain presuppositions, prejudices and stereotypes become so much part of the fabric of everyday life, so all-pervading in the language, attitudes and ethos of the workplace, that people simply cannot recognise it any more. The same is true of the kind of sexism that has been very much in the headlines lately, where patronising remarks and attitudes towards women are so much part of the office furniture that no one can see any more how offensive they really are.

In Jesus' day and before, as the readings at Mass show, lepers were shunned and ostracised. They were literally marginalised – sent to live on the edge of the town, far away from contact with unaffected people. When a society or community takes this approach towards one group of people, it becomes easier to demonise and marginalise others, be they immigrants, asylum seekers, gypsies, the disabled, paedophiles, Muslims, the list goes. A decade or so ago, the untouchables were those suffering from HIV Aids. Children who had innocently contracted the

disease through blood transfusion or an infected parent were ostracized at school, or even banned because other parents were taking their children away. Every age and culture has its 'lepers', even today.

Some years ago, when I was Vicar General, part of my work, a small part, thankfully, for there are very few of them, involved managing clergy accused or convicted of acts of child abuse. These no longer have a future as priests, but helping them to reintegrate into society is difficult and delicate. Even trying to find somewhere for a former priest in this category to attend Mass on a Sunday, which is his and anybody's inalienable right, is fraught with difficulty. A negotiation and discussion has to take place with a particular parish before the accused can attend, and this can be a very severe test and crisis for Christian charity. Forgiveness and fear wrestle with each other; the Lord's clear injunction to welcome the sinner and the outcast to the meal at which he is present conflicts with the inevitable risk this poses. We are aware that there will certainly be victims of similar abuse in our congregation who may feel abused anew by the presence of such a person. What, I wonder, would we do if such a request were made of us here?

This is a situation in which looking to Jesus in today's gospel is both helpful and not. When he encounters a leper in the reading, he resolves the problem by curing the man so that he is no longer an outcast. We do not have the power (or perhaps the faith) to cure the lepers of today – the paedophile, for instance – of his sickness and resolve the problem in that way. Also, through our eyes, it is easy for Jesus to welcome the leper as the poor man is hardly to blame for his illness. We are not so sure about that where the paedophile is concerned. That makes it difficult for us to see them as victims themselves. Theirs is a condition that denies them sympathy or understanding in the popular imagination. They are widely regarded with contempt, even disgust, which enables the less scrupulous parts of the media to pursue and persecute them without pity.

Yet all this was true of lepers in the time of Jesus who were believed to be afflicted because of some dreadful unforgivable sin they had committed, but Jesus still welcomes the leper who comes to him. This was as profoundly shocking to the people of Jesus' time as it would be for me to welcome a convicted paedophile into our midst today. What, then, is Jesus telling us about our own attitudes to the outcast? I leave you to draw your own conclusions. I must confess, I find the challenge and the implications very difficult. If ever I needed convincing that being a Christian is hard, it would be this that made the case. It makes me realise that following Christ really means carrying the cross and that, at times, the cross can seem very heavy indeed.