



February 14th

THE NEW SHOFAR

***What God has made clean, let no person sully
To embrace the “leper” is to embrace Christ***

Who is that person?

There are many ways of judging the identity of a person and not all of them fit into the biblical vision of the true nature and value of a human being. In today's readings the focus is on the way Israel and then the society at the time of Jesus responded to people who were suffering from truly awful diseases. For them the identities of the lepers is clear. They are, above all else, lepers, people disfigured and disgusting on account of this terrible, contagious disease. Out of ignorance and fear, they threw him out of the community. They dehumanised him, judged him as being someone guilty of an unknown sin and now enduring the appropriate punishment. He was cancelled from membership of the human community and was forced to identify with the animals living beyond the community boundaries.

But the suffering of the lepers involved far more than just the physical pain of the disease and the loneliness and feelings of rejection. It would have been intolerably humiliating to be so widely hated and despised; to be told they stink, are disgusting to look at; to be mocked, stoned and treated to public displays of hatred. They were forced to hide themselves whenever someone else came close. Their only utterances were to be warnings to others – *Unclean! Unclean.*

If the people hated the leper, God also hated them...surely?

From Israel's perspective, these people were physically and spiritually unclean. Not only did they need to be thrown out of the company of good clean-living Jews, they needed to be kept away from God as well. How could God possibly ever love a leper? Why would God be concerned about the welfare of someone humanity had rejected as being unworthy of love and compassion?

See what is going on here? The way the people of Israel were looking on the lepers had been elevated to the way God was looking at and judging those same lepers.

After all, it was God who gave them that terrible disease. Thus, they were excluded from the worshipping community, cut off from any chance of reconciliation and healing. Their one enduring source of hope should have been with God but now that too has been closed off from them. Unless a miracle took place, they were doomed to die an ignoble death, alone, marginalised, hated, despised and fit for Sheol and

quite possibly not even given the dignity of a burial. If God did not love them, why should God's chosen people love them?

We are, above all else, creatures in God's image and loved by God

The leper's existence as a human person was summed up by the disease. He was a leper. He was not a person with leprosy. He was a leper. And therein is the challenge of our reading from Leviticus. We live in a world where men and women are first of all identified and judged as human persons on the basis of those things which are not of significance in the eyes of God – black, gay, white, trans, hetero, male, female, married, single, old, young, rich, poor, and the list goes on. It is on this basis a moral judgment is then made of their worth. We can walk past them in their need. We can ignore them, cut them off, marginalise them, persecute them and do all kinds of loveless things to them. All on the basis of our assessment of what we see as their true identity and worth. It is nothing other than a useful cop out as it enables us to excuse ourselves from any responsibility for loving them and caring for them. Like the lepers, we can keep them at a distance because of the way we have judged them and have then gone on to reassure ourselves that the way we see them is, in fact, the way God too sees and assesses them.

There is an obligation to love that transcends all laws

Whatever of the way our contemporary world wants to evaluate people, we have to deal with the model of ministry provided for us by Jesus. He knew the Law and obeyed the Law. He knew the prohibitions on touching a leper and the consequences of such a contact. And yet, when He heard this man's cries for help and saw the pain of his isolation and humiliation, He understood a far greater and deeper truth. What he saw was no longer a leper but a man who was suffering. He was encountering a man with an illness whose deep pain transcended anything the disease itself could inflict on his body and his soul. The verb used by Mark is a very strong one – *moved with pity* but better translated as meaning *it was as though a knife was thrust into his heart*. He was ripped apart inside at the man's pain

Mark goes to great pains to introduce this healing miracle story right at the opening of his Gospel because it sets out the clear agenda this Jesus will follow. It is an indication of the way He will engage with the world in which He was ministering. It thus stands as the model for the way we show the world a very different vision of what it means to be a human being in God's creation.

While society in the West may want to assess and evaluate a person on the basis of externals, the Way of the Kingdom is far more life transforming and uplifting. We see all others as being fundamentally good and sacred – even when they hurt and offend us. We hear them and hear their pain and we show to them the love their Lord and their God has for them. They are far more than anything they can do for themselves and far more than anything other people can do to them. Alleluia!

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