

St Marylebone 11 am Harvest 2014

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, leprosy is a very curable disease and, in the past 20 years, some 16 million people have been cured of the once-feared disfiguring ailment thanks to the World Health Organization supplying free drugs to the countries where it is still endemic.

Fewer than half a million people around the world, now suffer from leprosy, and these unfortunate people are mostly to be found in the remoter parts of India, China and Africa.

But before the advent of effective drug treatments, leprosy was widespread and the most usual way of dealing with those suffering from the disease was to exclude them from society; to confine them to isolated leper colonies far away from their families and their friends and the communities which knew only too well what confirmation of the disease meant.

Throughout Mediaeval Europe, lepers were required to carry bells or wooden clappers, both to warn off people who approached them and to call out for alms, and in every society, in every age, leprosy has consigned those

who suffer from it to a life of exclusion and ostracization.

In Jesus' day, Leprosy was just one of a number of disfiguring skin diseases termed '*zara'ath*' (Hebrew צרעת).

The Septuagint, the late second century BC, Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, translated *zara'ath* as *lepra* and hence the identification of a long list of ancient skin diseases as 'leprosy' in our scriptures.

But *zara'ath* signified much more than a skin disease; it signified that the sufferer was 'ritually unclean' and therefore excluded not only from society but also from God.

Because only a Jewish priest could declare someone ritual unclean, only a Jewish priest could pronounce such a person free of the impurity and bring about their reintegration and restoration, not only into the ritual life of the community but also into the community from which he or she had been excluded.

To declare a sufferer 'clean', 'ritually pure', the priest would pour spring water into an earthenware pot, over which one of two birds would be slaughtered and into which the blood was allowed to run freely.

The priest would then dip the remaining bird along with cedarwood, red string and hyssop into the bloodied water, and sprinkle the person who was to be declared ritually 'clean' seven times on the back of the hand or forehead.

The slaughtered bird would be buried and the living bird was allowed to fly away.

But the cleansing ritual was not over with the freeing of the bird, for following this ritual the the man or woman concerned would then have to shave their hair and wash their clothes, wait for seven days before repeating the shaving and the washing and then on the eighth day they had to make three animal sacrifices in the Temple, where the priest would take some of the blood from the animals and place it on the supplicants right ear lobe, right thumb, and right big toe.

It is perhaps little wonder, that with so much to do, 9 of the cured lepers made off straightaway without stopping to say 'thank you'!

All of this seems a very long way from Parson Hawker's Morwenstow in Cornwall where, in 1843, our modern Harvest Thanksgiving finds its origins.

But bringing fruit and flowers into parish churches and singing *We plough the fields and scatter, and All things*

bright and beautiful, does make us stop, like the grateful lepers who had been cured, and pause in the midst of busy, over-full lives, and say a much-needed but often-forgotten 'thank you'.

I have told the story, many times, of how a visiting archdeacon from the Diocese of Bungoma in Kenya was asked by a Rutland parishioner what the main difference was between the Church in Africa and the Church in England.

Without even having to think, the archdeacon replied, "That's easy: in England you are always asking God for things, when you have so much already; in Africa we are always thanking God for what we have."

Harvest is our chance to stop, to take stock, and to say 'thank you' for what we have: our food, our clothing, our homes, our jobs, our schooling and, with the thankful leper, our health, our secure place in their life of the Church and the societies which nourish us and sustain us with fellowship and work and leisure.

Before encountering Jesus, the lepers really did have nothing; having been given their lives back again, they had so much for which they should have been thankful, but only one of them did anything to show it.

Today, the Prayer of General Thanksgiving, from the *Book of Common Prayer* is all too easily overlooked, but is with that prayer that I shall now end, and I invite you to say it with me:

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men. We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful; and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, world without end.
Amen.