

Christ Church West Wimbledon

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Sermon 10 October 2022

Luke 17:11-19: Ten Lepers – One Turned Back

(Tim2 2:8-15)

The first thing that I did, when beginning to prepare this sermon, was read today's Epistle and Gospel, as I generally do. And the first thing I thought was "what on earth can I say, based on those readings that will interest, engage and inform our congregation?" – As is very often my first reaction. So I put down my Bible and went to bed. In the morning I remembered that I have in fact seen a leper, in real life. It was in Jordan, towards the end of a church trip that had started in the Holy Land with the last few days spent over the border in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The trip had been long planned, for the second half of September 2021 – you will remember that New York's World Trade Center towers were destroyed by Islamic Terrorists on the 11th of that month. Everyone was quite nervous of travelling to Israel, fearful that there might be trouble there too, with their history of violence and unrest between the Jewish State and Islamic Palestinians. At least a third of our tour group had dropped out, and many tours had been cancelled altogether. Security was very tight in Israel, for our, as well as their own, protection. But in other ways it was a remarkably good trip, for that very reason – there were many fewer tourists than usual. Our bus driver would whistle into a nearly empty bus park, stopping right outside the front door of a museum. In Bethlehem, we did not have to queue all the way round Manger Square, as many, many, tourists have had to do, but walked straight into the Church of the Nativity and down into the crypt, where we could stay as long as we wanted, and sang "Away in a Manger" without feeling that we were disturbing anyone. But it was still a relief to cross the border into Jordan which has no fear of Islamic terrorism. Jordan is a peaceful country, and relatively prosperous - an upper middle income country in world terms, and with good standards of literacy and general education.

So, Jordan is a peaceful well-ordered state, and leprosy is fairly easily curable at a comparatively low cost – so I was surprised to see a woman begging, clearly displaying her face which was badly scarred by leprosy. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised – Jordan is very generous in its acceptance of refugees from neighbouring states, and this woman was a refugee from Iraq. But I had thought that leprosy was going the same way as smallpox, being eradicated world-wide. But that was not so then, and is still not so now.

Lepira, the UK leprosy relief charity, alone is responsible for the diagnosis of, and treatment for, over 600 cases a year, and estimates that worldwide there are over 3 million cases of undiagnosed leprosy, mainly due to fear and lack of knowledge on the part of the victims and those around them.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus cured ten lepers, pleased that one of them, the Samaritan, turned back to thank Him, but without any implication that the cure should be withdrawn from the other nine. Two thousand years later, I think that there are two lessons which we should learn from this story.

The first is that we are still so far from the Kingdom of God, that despite the hugely improved medical knowledge and treatment options that we have, we have still not been able to treat and eliminate leprosy, or many other diseases, when it is within our power to do so – to our shame.

And the second is that everyone needs to recognise the good even in our traditional enemies. Jesus did not seek to fight the occupying Romans, nor discriminate against the hated Samaritans. And in this case, of course, it was particularly easy to find good in the Samaritan, since it was him who actually thought to thank Jesus.

Lord, help us to work and pray for better help in eliminating leprosy and other serious diseases which plague jurisdictions poorer and less fortunate than our own. And help us to promote peace and justice between all races and peoples, including those under occupation that they too may seek and find the good in their oppressors. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.