



## HOMILY

### SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

13-14 FEBRUARY 2021

I have told this story before and I apologise to those who have already heard it. When I went to stay on a Kenyan missionary station in the late 1980s I found I had taken with me a pair of trousers which were thread bare at the knees. I felt I couldn't go around with them in that state. I put them in the wastepaper basket in my room. A few days later I was surprised to see them being worn by a man in the village. The point is that the man was a leper who dragged himself around half on the ground because a leg had become distorted by the leprosy. The missionary sister, a charming local lady, told me that she had retrieved the trousers, repaired them and given them to the leper. I was mortified at the thought of my part in our western throw away culture.

Leprosy was a common illness in Palestine at the time of Jesus, and lepers lived lives ostracised from other people. It is significant in more ways than one, that Jesus told the leper to show himself to the priest and to say nothing to anyone. I imagine that it was an impossible temptation not to mingle with others, having been cut off from ordinary people no doubt for a long time!

In the not so distant past we might have felt patronising at the thought of peoples in third world countries still being prone to contagious diseases. Illnesses like typhoid, tuberculosis or diphtheria were considered things of the past. But we live in an age which demonstrates that there has been a return of epidemics from around the world. We've had HIV, Ebola, bird flu and now covid. May be in the

West we should learn humility after the decades of Imperial conquest, slavery and exploitation of other peoples' resources.

How are we to react to covid from a spiritual point of view? Some people are attracted to the comparisons with wartime with talks of finding the spirit of the blitz Dunkirk and defeating the enemy and so on. But in Christian teaching there is such a thing as the Just War theory. When is it right to go to war? I remember a moral theologian at the time of the Falklands war who spoke of the need to ask ourselves whether we were in some way responsible for what was taking place. The same might said of the covid epidemic. As human beings we have exploited the world resources and invaded the animal kingdom so ruthlessly that surely there is bound to be a payback time? The rape of the Amazon threatens the ecology of the world in a monumental sense. Global warming points to very serious problems for future generations. Pope Francis is eloquent and clear in his warnings to us of what will happen if we carry on like this.

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday once again. Usually in Lent the call is for simple acts of sacrifice like giving up something. In the light of covid and other global challenges maybe we should be seeking to discover a spirit of penance and humility at the way we have despoiled God's creation. It is a small thing perhaps to throw away a pair of trousers that could be repaired and worn once more, but perhaps it is a straw in the wind which illustrates mankind's casual greed. Leprosy in the gospel is about cleansing. Can we be cleansed?