

Leprosy, as we understand it today, probably did not exist in the Middle East in Jesus' day. The horribly disfiguring disease we call leprosy, Hansen's Disease, was one of the plagues of Europe that was introduced into the Middle East during the Crusades.

What our two Scripture readings today refer to as leprosy --- included a wide range of unpleasant or unappealing skin problems or diseases, many of which were only temporary.

Although far less medically threatening, the leprosy of the Scriptures could be even worse --- for they carried a social dimension.

Those with anything labeled "leprosy" were by law immediately made social outcasts, a result of the lack of understanding of medical problems.

In Biblical days – anything that was not understood was seen as the result of evil ---or the result of sin. To keep the evil or sin from spreading, people were labeled as "unclean" and exiled from the community – often being forced to live in isolated camps or caves.

While such extreme exclusions sound unsympathetic and unmerciful --- we are no more sophisticated than our ancestors in faith. . .

In living memory – blacks could not live among whites. Internment camps were created for Japanese-Americans during World War II. Many today push to ban Muslims from entering our country.

Within our own church – Catholics were not allowed to marry non-Catholics and were forbidden to enter Protestant Churches. . . My own mother has been a member of the same parish for almost 75 years--- and is still viewed as an outsider – because she *moved* into the community ---- rather than being born there.

Why do things like this happen? Because we are usually afraid of anyone who is different from us --- and because we have a lack of understanding of who they are.

It continues to be a reality that people with serious illness become isolated and lonely. Many of our elderly are left alone and abandoned in nursing homes. Like it or not – we have to admit we are still pretty good at making lepers.

Naaman, in the first reading, and the Samaritan in the Gospel – who both were graced with a cure from leprosy – had another strike against them: neither were Jews, and therefore, were doubly unwanted. . . The cures they received – the REAL cures they received – were not from disease – but rather from their isolation.

Both found places within a community after their physical healing – Naaman came to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and the Samaritan came to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

There is an important dimension beyond the cures we witness in today's readings. We also see a spirit of **gratitude** being expressed. These readings encourage us to find gratitude within ourselves and give expression to it.

St. Paul sat in prison awaiting execution as he wrote his letter to Timothy. At the same time the Christians of Rome were fleeing the city to escape the persecution of Nero who was killing Christians right and left. Paul had been left behind abandoned and alone.

**And yet he did not despair!** Rather he was writing Timothy encouraging him to live a life of gratitude: we have been freed from sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ! “So what if I am in prison” Paul seems to say. If we stay faithful, if we hold out to the end, we shall live with Christ! Paul’s gratitude was found in the knowledge of this – and his gratitude gave him the strength to endure. Many would argue there is a lack of gratitude in our society today. A recent study showed few parents teach their children to write thank-you cards for gifts anymore. If we aren’t even expressing gratitude to one another – it would come as no shock that we probably aren’t expressing it to God either! As Christians we should have difficulty with this concept! The Scriptures describe giving thanks as “making a return to the Lord.” We see Naaman dedicating himself to prayer and praise to the God of Israel in thanksgiving. The Samaritan returned to Jesus with overt thanks not so much for a cure --but for being allowed to know who God really is. St. Paul gratefully endured hardship and willingly awaited death in order to share the great gift of faith he had been given. Paul believed his perseverance would give others courage to persevere in their trials. But what about us? How do we make a return to the Lord? Do we dedicate ourselves to “thankful praise” to God? What do we have to show of our dedication to God in our homes? How many of us even dedicated daily time to prayer? After asking something from God—how many of us ever follow that up with a thank you? Perhaps we make ourselves into modern-day lepers – whose leprosy of stinginess and selfishness is easily spotted by other. Or, in our gratitude – will people see the power and the glory of God shine forth??