

19 April 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

We're all lepers now.

In the ancient world, villages banished lepers to stop their 'uncleanness' from spreading to them. Jesus once met a band of ten lepers in the hinterland. At least they had each other. He healed them so they could re-join the larger society (see St Luke 17: 11-19). But our larger society has gone underground. We steer clear of each other now and back away with suspicion. What if you're infected? What if I am? How can we know?

Meanwhile, our economy is in deep freeze and politicians are confounded. Their single-minded strategy 'to flatten the curve' causes new dimensions of suffering. Millions whom society had already quarantined in over-priced rental housing, who'd been earning obscenely low wages on part-time work, have seen their meagre income fall off a cliff. Homelessness and hunger loom for them. Those with wealth are safe and sound, for now, like survivalists ensconced in a well-stocked bunker. But even they may feel a mild pinch. Eventually. (*Then* we'll hear about it.) Meanwhile, the virus spreads. Its toll on health care workers, battling its effects on the front line, is exceeded only by those so afflicted. The devastation in some nursing homes is unutterably horrific.

This is not a cure. It's a stopgap while we await a new vaccine. Until then, we hang on. But how long?

Maybe you remember, as I do, lining up in school to be inoculated by a nurse. Nothing ever happened in school without first lining up, did it? When I rolled up my sleeve, I bit my lip to pass myself off as a 'brave boy'. We didn't want a needle, but no one asked what we wanted. There was no 'anti-vaccination' fad back then. Our parents rejoiced that vaccines had knocked a host of diseases on the head: measles, mumps, rubella, tetanus, diphtheria, polio, and more.

The idea behind vaccines is ancient. They're not magic potions. They inject an inert form of the very thing that would harm us. This gives our bodies a safe game to play, like soldiers shooting paint-ball guns at each other instead of real ones. They teach the body's immune system to prepare the

right weaponry, so it can defeat the live virus if it ever dares to invade us. Once enough people have been vaccinated, the disease can't spread anymore.

Societies are bodies too. Hatred, fear, and unchecked greed can 'go viral', making the 'body politic' ill, even terminally ill. Albert Camus wrote his novel, *The Plague*, while he fought with the French Resistance during Second World War. It tells the story of a deadly illness invading a village. There's the mayor, who wants to deny the plague even exists. There's the priest, who sees it as God's punishment. And there's a physician, Dr Rieux, who, like the French Resistance fighting the Nazi invaders, battles the plague with the only tools he has at hand: knowledge and human kindness. At one point, he thinks to himself: "...if there's one thing one can always yearn for and sometimes attain, it is human love."

Some people think Christian faith is a virus (Camus did). In its diseased forms, it can be. But if it's healthy, Christian faith is a vaccine. It's not a magic potion. It causes us to learn from that which would harm us – our own wounds and sins, certainly, but also the truths about ourselves we're too hostile to hear when they're pointed out by those we call 'enemy'. Isn't this why Jesus said we must learn to love our enemies? Does the COVID-19 virus not show us the gaps, cracks, and fissures of unfairness in our society?

The world treated Jesus as a virulent enemy. It banished and killed him and tried to forget him, anxious to return to 'normal' life. Risen but still scarred, he appeared to his disciples in 'lockdown' and commissioned them to a new way life. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (St John 20:21). Then he breathed God's peace into them. It's a divine inoculation of divine life. It doesn't make them immune from wounding, death, sorrow, or self-accusation. It teaches them from within themselves and from within the body of Christ, the Church, to battle and not to spread hatred and evil, and so to attain the one thing we yearn for, which is love, human and divine.

My goodness. Is that really the 'word count'? I did go on too long. Again. Yet here you are. You read all the way to the bottom. (You didn't just scroll here, did you?) If you wish, tell me how you are, what you're doing, and what you're thinking these days.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew