

Once upon a time there was once a man called Simeon, he was a good family man, and he lived with his wife and children in Samaria, near Galilee. He made a modest living from his land and on the whole was content with his lot. An ordinary man, living an ordinary life day by day – like most of us do.

But suddenly disaster struck, as it does sometimes. Simeon developed painful lesions on his skin which would not heal and within a very short time he, and everyone around him, knew he had leprosy.

Now leprosy is a deadly disease, and it is also unsightly, because the ends of the nerves die, which means that people can't feel their extremities. I have met someone with leprosy, with no nose! In Simeon's day, people were scared of catching leprosy and Simeon, knew he had it, which meant he could no longer live with his family or even in his village. He was forced into isolation, keeping well away from healthy people and warning them not to approach him by calling out "unclean, unclean". A bit like Covid!

From being a loved and respected husband, father and friend, he became someone to be feared. He became a Leper. A man defined by his illness.

Sometimes with little or no warning our lives can be rocked to their foundations. Things happen that instantly make us feel isolated, separated from everyone else, even those closest to us: it might be a sudden illness of body or mind; or a bereavement; or redundancy – all sorts of difficulties and crises can rock our world.

They often happen when we're at our most vulnerable and most in need of love, yet we can't reach out and others can't or daren't reach out to us. Sometimes people fear those who suffer great misfortune or loss, maybe because they fear they will catch it – like leprosy – or perhaps they just can't face thinking about what it must be like for the person they now try to avoid.

The important thing to hold onto here is that Simeon, along with the rest of the Lepers he would have spent time with, had no hope of recovering, being part of their families again, being part of society again. They would die lonely. So imagine what it must have felt like to hear that there was a Jewish Rabbi called Jesus who has cured people of all kinds of diseases including leprosy. Simeon and his fellow sufferers must have just hoped against hope that he would come near them, so that they too might be cured.

When Jesus does come to their village, the 10 lepers, including Simeon, set out to find Jesus. And it's not difficult – from every direction people are heading for one particular village, calling out to each other that Jesus would be passing through there today. There are so many people who need help, who need to be restored, forgiven, made whole, loved.

The Lepers keep their distance, they know that people will fear them and out of their fear try to attack them.

The vulnerable in our society often feel they have no voice. We rarely hear the human stories that lie behind failure, refugees, addiction, and destitution.

The crowd get more excited by the thought of Jesus coming through. Then one man shouts out, 'That must be Jesus' – he has an air of authority although he's talking and laughing with those around him as if they're equals.

Simeon stands stock still for a moment then realises the others have begun shouting out: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" and he joins in "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

They go on shouting until Jesus hears them. He steps away from the crowd and approaches them. Jesus gets closer to them than is safe and stretches his arms out as if he wants to hold them all in an embrace of love. Quietly, with compassion in his eyes, he speaks, "Go and show yourselves to the priests" That's all he says, "Go and

show yourselves to the priests” He smiles at them then turns back to the crowd.

Simeon and the other nine turn to walk away,

They go to the priests, so that the priests can certify they are now clean from leprosy. They look at their skin, at each other’s faces, almost unable to believe what they see. Clean, smooth skin, no sores, no open wounds, no disfigurements, nothing to suggest they’ve ever had leprosy. They can’t wait to see their loved ones, to feel human touch again, to return home and be people again,— not lepers.

All 10 are cured, but 9 out of 10 lepers just leave, run away.

Simeon doesn’t, Simeon is overwhelmed with love and thankfulness and awe. To the person who has restored him to life, to the fullness of life. Not just healed him, but restored him to his family, his friends, his society, himself.

1 out of 10 lepers stops to consider the amazing act of love he has received and says thank you.

The story of the lepers is an interesting one for Harvest but its here because it reminds us that God provides for all our needs. Yes we think of food, and drink at Harvest, but this story brings into focus our other needs that are met by God’s mercy. It also perhaps helps us to consider who the ‘lepers’ are in our society today. Who are the untouchables, the outcasts, the lonely, the vulnerable, the unwanted, the isolated? How do we treat them? Do we treat them as society treated lepers or do we treat them as Jesus treated lepers with open arms and love and care.

Our reading from Corinthians tells us that we should give as much as we are able, willingly, and cheerfully. This can refer to money, but it also refers to time, care, ourselves, our resources, our talents

and our love. When we are willing to give of ourselves to others who are in need, we are told that God will provide for us with every blessing in abundance. Caring for the needs of others, in what ever shape or form that takes may be costly, emotionally, physically, spiritually and financially, but when we give we are told that we will be rewarded and our lives enriched by it. We may get a thank you, but considering that even Jesus only had 10% thank you rate for his healing miracles, perhaps we should just be content with knowing that God loves a cheerful giver.

This Harvesttime, be thankful to God for small mercies as well as the big ones. Be thankful to people who help us and care for our needs. Identify those who you find difficult to help, or who you don’t understand, or perhaps you find repulsive. Pray for them, find the God in them that you can relate to, because we are all made in the image of God, and consider what you can do to help their situation. And when you have decided what you are capable of doing, do it willingly and cheerfully. AMen

Lord God, you created the world
and you saw that it was good.
Today, at harvest time,
we lift our eyes from the pavement and the floor
and look with fresh awareness at the world you gave us.
Open our hearts, good Lord,
to see the riches and the wonder that you give your children:
food to sustain their bodies,
marvellous sights and sounds to feed their minds,
beauty and love to fill their souls.
Open our hearts, good Lord,
until they overflow with happiness and thanks
for all the gifts you give us in your world;
and sweep them clean of petty grumbles
about the little things we would have liked

but that you chose not to give us.

Open our hearts, good Lord,

until – with angels and archangels,

with those who stand across the narrow river on the other side,

and with your faithful servants here on earth in every country –

they overflow with praise.

Open our hearts

to offer you a rich and fitting harvest

not only of our praise, but of our lives,

lived in the way that you intended human lives to be.

We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.