

Baptism OLJC 2021

One of the stories that I heard many times in primary school in Sydney was the story of Fr Damien and the Lepers: possibly, because the events happened relatively recently and in the Pacific region it was a story which seemed more local to us in Australia than some others.

This is what happened. When leprosy broke out among the people of the Hawaiian islands in the middle of the 19th century, the authorities responded by setting up a leper colony on the remote island of Molokai. Those suffering from the disease were snatched by force from their families and isolated there. The intention was to allow them to perish without contaminating others (a little like the voluntary isolation of the Derbyshire village of Eyam when plague was discovered there). Is this sounding in any way familiar?

Moved by the terrible plight of these abandoned people, a young Belgian priest, Damien de Veuster, asked to be allowed to minister to them. He realised that there was only one effective way to do this - to go and live among them.

Having got permission, he went to Molokai. At first, on the insistence of his superiors and the local administration, he tried to minister to the people at a certain distance. But he soon realised that unless he lived among them he would never gain their trust. He disobeyed his superiors and did so. And he contracted leprosy.

The reaction of the lepers was immediate and wholehearted: they embraced him and took him to their hearts as one of them. There was no longer any need to keep a distance; the lepers now had someone who could talk with authority about leprosy, about brokenness, about rejection and about public shame.

The Baptism of Jesus, which we celebrate today, was a source of embarrassment to the early Christians. Even John the Baptist himself found it incongruous and even tried to prevent it, as we heard in this morning's gospel. Why? Because John's baptism was a summons to *repentance*; it was a call to sinners who were conscious of their sinfulness. Yet Christians knew that Jesus was no sinner. He did not stand in need of repentance. So why go through this ceremony?

Clearly, Jesus wanted to demonstrate what we would call solidarity with the people he had come to help. He was baptized, and baptized publicly, to identify with, stand with sinners. When he stepped into the Jordan, he was really saying to those around him - and to us - 'I'm on your side.'

The imagery of *water* in Holy Scripture and Christian liturgy is rich but paradoxical. Water is the means of life and the symbol of all that is spiritually life-giving. 'Everything shall live where the river runs', says Ezekiel (47.9). And Jesus is the

fount of 'living water'; the one who drinks of him shall never thirst (John 4.14). But water is also the stuff of what Genesis calls 'the waters', the primal and malign waters of chaos from which God creates an ordered world, the waters which must part if God's people are to go free, the waters which Jesus tramples underfoot, the waters of death which one day will be no more (Revelation 21.1 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more'). Waters, as Isaiah goes on to say in chapter 43, denote the adversity through which we pass (43.2 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you'). That sense of God's companionship with us is at the heart of this feast. John, who baptized Jesus, also passed through those waters of adversity; we may be feeling as though we're having our moment of adversity just now as well.

Jesus' public ministry, which was the spur to Damien's ministry to the lepers, followed the same pattern. He did not keep himself apart from sinners; he would not wait for them to come to him. He joined them where they were, so much so that he was soon accused of being a notorious sinner himself and treated as such by the religious leaders. In the end he died as if he were a condemned criminal, just as Damien died an outcast leper.

That's what this element of the epiphany festival emphasises: that Jesus *stands with us* in all the situations of our lives, a brother who shows us that we are God's sons and daughters too. He shows his love for us and he shows us how we can truly help others, as the story of Damien vividly recalls. He wants to lead us out of imperfection, sin and death to share in the enjoyment of fullness of life here and hereafter.