Leprosy – an ancient disease of modern times

We might think of leprosy as a disease of ancient times, which was referred to in the Bible, feared by all and destroyed many lives.

Leprosy is mentioned many times in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testament. It is described as a scourge, a curse and a terrible affliction requiring cleansing. In Matthew 8:1, Mark 1:40 and Luke 5:12 we read how Jesus cured a man with leprosy. In all three Gospels, the man begged Jesus to cure him and Jesus, filled with compassion for the man's plight, cured him.

In the Middle Ages, St Francis of Assisi followed in the footsteps of Jesus. As a young man, a chance encounter with a man with leprosy transformed his life forever. He left his wealthy family and comfortable lifestyle and began a new life of poverty. Francis followed what he felt was God's calling. He rejected money and wealth and preached about returning to God and obedience to the church.

In more recent times, the Roman Catholic priest, Father Damien (1840 – 1889) now known as St Damien of Molokai, cared for leprosy outcasts on the island of Molokai. He arrived at the settlement on 10 May 1873, to find six hundred people with leprosy living in impoverished conditions. During his ministry, he shared his life with the community providing both medical and emotional support. He also built houses, schools, roads, hospitals, and churches. This incredible calling transformed the lives of those living in the community.

Many other notable individuals have dedicated their lives to caring for people with leprosy, including the nurse Kate Marsden (1859 – 1931) who founded St Francis Leprosy Guild, the philanthropist Raoul Follereau (1903 – 1997), who founded the leprosy charity *Fondation Raoul Follereau* and *Mother Teresa of Pakistan*, the physician, Dr Ruth Pfau (1929 – 2017).

What about leprosy now?

The World Health Organization recently reported that thousands of adults and children have been diagnosed with leprosy in 2025. Many were diagnosed with visible disabilities such as blindness, clawed hands or lost fingers and toes, that will affect their lives forever. Moreover, it is readily acknowledged that millions more are undiagnosed, spreading infection within their communities or, living with its life-changing effects such as blindness, clawed hands, or chronic tropical ulcers.

Leprosy causes more disability than other infectious diseases. World Health Organization

Leprosy is also one of the most stigmatised diseases on earth. A leprosy diagnosis is a life sentence for some, often considered a curse from God and the result of sin. Many people with leprosy are thrown out of their homes, communities, or forced to leave their employment leading to a life of begging. Leprosy is still a legitimate reason to divorce in some countries. It is also a reason that anyone fearing that they may have caught leprosy, is too frightened to ask for a diagnosis.

Think how often we hear the word “leper” used in a derogatory fashion.

Hundreds of leprosy communities, sometimes referred to as colonies, still exist in remote locations throughout the world where people ostracised by leprosy, live out the rest of their lives.

The reality experienced by millions of people today, is that leprosy is a disease of modern times, and one that is still destroying lives.

So, what is leprosy?

Leprosy is a disease of the nerves which causes a lack of sensation in peripheral parts of the body such as the hands and feet. This lack of sensation leads to unintentional injury, chronic ulcers and, if left untreated, clawing of hands and feet, amputation, and blindness.

Is leprosy infectious and how is it spread?

There is a widespread fear that leprosy is a highly contagious disease. In reality, it is difficult to catch and ninety-five percent of us are naturally immune. Doctors and scientists are not sure exactly how leprosy is spread, but it is thought through airborne droplet infection such as from coughing and sneezing. Prolonged and close contact with someone with undiagnosed leprosy, such as between a parent and child, friends, or neighbours, may also contribute. People with depleted immune systems or who have poor nutrition, drink unsafe water, and live with inadequate sanitation are more likely to catch leprosy.

Can leprosy be cured?

A bacterium causes leprosy and, it can be cured by a combination of antibiotics, called multidrug therapy or MDT. MDT is available throughout the world to treat people with leprosy *if they can be found and diagnosed*. Since the 1980s, over sixteen million people have been cured of leprosy.

So why are so many people still affected by leprosy today?

There are many, complex reasons why people catch leprosy today and, even if treated, remain affected by the disease. For example, leprosy is difficult to diagnose at its early stages, before any visible disabilities start to appear. Initially leprosy shows on the skin as numb patches and is often misdiagnosed as other skin complaints such as eczema or scabies.

Although research is underway, there is no easy-to-use, diagnostic test to diagnose leprosy. The only reliable method to diagnose leprosy, is a skin biopsy that needs to be analysed in a laboratory. In some people, leprosy may incubate for up to twenty years before showing any visible signs. This long incubation phase means that undiagnosed individuals may unknowingly spread leprosy within their communities for years.

Unlike some neglected tropical diseases which can be cured by mass drug administration, leprosy is more complex, requiring longer drug treatment, more monitoring and long-term care. People with leprosy who have been cured of the disease *and who are no longer infectious*, may face considerable resistance from their families or communities and not be allowed to return to their homes.

Where is leprosy found?

It is no surprise, that leprosy is found in some of the poorest countries in the world, sometimes those with a troubled or war-torn past. India, Brazil and Indonesia account for 80% of people with leprosy, but Angola, Bangladesh, Comoros, Côte D'Ivoire, DR Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kiribati, Madagascar, Micronesia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Tanzania are all endemic for leprosy.

Leprosy is reported in over one hundred out of 195 countries worldwide. That means over half of all countries in the world today have leprosy.

Another tragedy of leprosy is that over ten thousand children are diagnosed with the disease every year. Of this number, some are diagnosed with visible disabilities, that even with corrective surgery or assistive devices will affect them for life, even if the stigma does not.

How do we care for people with leprosy?

Caring for people with leprosy means treatment with MDT, surgery to improve leprosy disabilities, the long-term treatment of leprosy ulcers, and reintegrating people affected by leprosy back into society.

Without social services in some countries, the provision of care for the elderly affected by leprosy is critical for their very survival. Some leprosy centres care for people affected by leprosy and their families, *for their entire lives*.

Thanks to the generosity of many people, leprosy centres and communities exist throughout the world to care for people living with leprosy. The doctors, nurses, nuns, and volunteers who work there often dedicate their entire lives or careers to caring for people with leprosy.

The story of Dal Bahadur Pariyar

This is a photograph of Dal Bahadur Pariyar who lives at the Lamatara Leprosy Settlement, south of Pokhara in Nepal. Dal has been affected by leprosy since he was five years old. He said: “I was abandoned when I was very small. I was isolated in a small cottage from the age of eight, where I lived for four years.”

He has had no education and moved to Lamatara about thirty years ago when the small settlement was built. By the time he was diagnosed and treated for leprosy, his eyes, face, hands, and feet were all disabled or affected by the disease. He has nobody to care for him since his wife died of leprosy two years ago. He needs a walking stick to get around and his eyesight is failing. “I don’t have limbs” he says about his lack of fingers, “and my eyes are getting poorer. What will happen to me in a few years’ time? How will I wash, cook, or clean?”

Dal is pictured with his daughter and granddaughter. Photograph by kind permission of Tom Bradley

So, will we ever see an end to leprosy?

For us to see an end to leprosy, new strategies have been developed to find and treat everyone with the disease. The so-called *active case-finding* requires a complex combination of organisation and planning, healthcare skills, data collection and recording to find people who have leprosy, diagnose, and treat them, and their families, friends, and neighbours, and monitor their progress and health over time. The good news is that if we can find everyone with leprosy, village by village, town by town, city by city, and country by country, w*e can see an end to leprosy*. But we are not there yet, and far too many people are affected by leprosy in the world today.

What can I do to help see an end to leprosy?

Any donation or, fundraising would be welcome such as a coffee morning, a quiz, "bring-and-buy," concert, a sponsored run or anything else that your congregation or friends might enjoy. Any funds raised will help rid the world of this terrible disease. You might like to give a talk or put up a poster. And as always, your prayers would transform the lives of people with leprosy.

During Papal Chapel presided over by Pope Francis with the Rite of Canonization of Blessed María Antonia de San José de Paz y Figueroa on 11 February 2024, he reflected on the Gospel, which described Jesus healing a person with leprosy (Mark 1:40-45). The man not only suffered from leprosy, but above all, from being marginalised.

Fear, prejudice and false religiosity: these are three causes of a great injustice, three 'leprosy infections of the soul' that make the weak suffer because they are treated like rubbish. Brothers and sisters, let us not think that this only happened in the past. How many suffering people we encounter on the pavements of our cities! And how many fears, prejudices and incongruous behaviours, even on the part of those who believe and call themselves Christians, continue to hurt them! Even in our time, there is much marginalisation, there are barriers that need to be broken down, there are 'leprosy infections' that need healing. And how does such healing take place? Not by keeping our distance." Pope Francis pointed out that Jesus made the first move and touched the sick man, although he knew he was violating the ideas of purity at that time.

St Francis Leprosy Guild

St Francis Leprosy Guild ("SFLG") is the UK's only Catholic leprosy charity working towards a leprosy-free world. SFLG supports the work of over thirty leprosy centres, clinics, hospitals, care homes and leprosy-related projects in twelve countries where leprosy is endemic. The

charity's TRACE operating strategy is putting an emphasis on active case-finding; early detection of leprosy followed by treatment with Multidrug Therapy.

For contact details, questions about leprosy or more information please email: enquiries@stfrancisleprosy.org or visit: www.stfrancisleprosy.org