

For a few years I lived in East Oxford in Bullingdon Road, which has Greyfriars Franciscan church at one end, and the Cowley Road at the other.

It was an 'interesting' area to live in, and is even more so now I'm told; especially the Cowley Road part of it.

In fact, when I was driving through Cowley Road recently, I had to stop the car for a dozen or so students dressed as Roman soldiers to cross!!

But, although it's possible to see all sorts of exotic sights in East Oxford these days, I think I'm safe in saying that you'll never see a person with leprosy there.

But if we could enter Dr Who's Tardis, and go back to 1126 we certainly would have done so.

That's the year a leper colony was founded in that area by King Henry I; and the chapel of St Bartholomew, built for the colony, is still there near Bartlemas Close.

Leper colonies were placed outside the city walls for the Church to care for those with that terrible disease.

The Church did care for them with compassion and love; but it was also to keep them isolated from the rest of the people of Oxford.

People were terrified of the disease because, if it took hold, it could decimate a population.

So, in effect, lepers were quarantined; exiled from their families and friends.

It must have been a slow, painful living death for them and, in a real sense, for their families too.

When 'Time Team,' the C4 TV series, undertook an archaeological dig in the remains of a medieval leper colony, they reconstructed a lepers face from a skeleton they found.

With his skin having been eaten away, and his face disfigured by the disease, it reminded me of the prophecy of Isaiah about how the Saviour would appear at His Crucifixion: "His face was so

disfigured he seemed hardly human, and from his appearance, one would scarcely know he was a man." Is. 52: 14

And when I think about medieval lepers in this country, and lepers in Bible times being banished outside the city wall, it also reminds me of Jesus, and His Crucifixion.

Jesus was like a leper to those who wanted Him dead.

He was like a man with a deadly disease who could infect the whole of the people, and destroy them by His teaching, and miracles.

Yes, like a leper He was taken outside the city walls.

Not just to exile Him, but to exterminate Him on the Cross.

But God, through the power of the Lord's meekness and majesty, overcame the real disease afflicting all of us – sin.

That terrible disease, which cuts us off from the Lord's healing love.

Yet, so often, we resist the Lord's healing by exiling Him outside the walls of our hearts.

But Jesus, the Holy One of God, overcame the leprosy of sin, which brought suffering and death into His good creation, by dying in our stead so that we can be reunited with Him.

As Paul writes to the Ephesians: "But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ. For Christ himself has brought peace to us when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us." Eph. 2: 13 – 14

And this is what happens to the leper in the Gospel who is inexorably drawn to Jesus; seeing in Him his only chance for salvation from his leprosy.

So: "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him." Mk. 1: 41

He had mercy on the man; and the mercy of God is entwined with His grace and salvation.

His grace, which gives you something you could never have imagined; an inexplicable gift that I truly don't deserve.

And what is that gift?

None other than the life of God indwelling me, through His Spirit, and conforming me to Jesus, the Son.

So the leper receives, not only physical salvation from his leprosy, but salvation in all its richness, and fullness.

In Luke's Gospel, when Jesus calls Peter to follow Him, He tells him to: "Put out into deep water." Lk. 5: 4

Ostensibly to catch fish, which Peter does in abundance; but he's really being called to go deeper into God's grace made flesh in Jesus.

He immediately left his successful fishing business, and followed Jesus.

He was no longer 'exiled' outside the wall that had separated him from the deep water of God's love.

Now I'm not saying that we all have to leave what we're doing in the secular world in order to be an authentic Christian.

The Lord does indeed call some to do that but, for most of us, He wants us to carry Him into the world we inhabit.

Into our families, our work, our relationships, our leisure time: the whole of our lives.

In Keble College there hangs in the chapel the painting by William Holman Hunt called: 'The Light Of The World,' which shows Jesus knocking on a door in an ivy-entwined wall.

He's inviting the person inside to come out of exile into His light. There isn't a door handle on the outside of the door: the only handle is on the inside.

Like the leper in the Gospel, we must turn the handle in our hearts so that the Lord can draw us into:

"The freedom and glory of the children of God." Rm. 8: 21

"Look! I stand at the door and knock. [Jesus says] If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in." Rev. 3: 20