

Homily – Year B - 6th Sunday of Year – Plymouth Cathedral

Yesterday I had my first vaccine jab. I had a call from Devon County Council the day before to invite me for it because, apparently, I'm regarded as a potential "super spreader" of the virus. Mine was facilitated by a lovely Midwife called Anne-Marie, who remarked, "It's not a nice title for you, Father, but of course you're a super-spreader of the Gospel". "Well, I certainly hope so!" I naturally replied.

As everybody has remarked, the roll out of the vaccine is an extraordinarily efficient process and we can only be grateful to the many healthcare professionals and volunteers who are making it possible.

In Jesus' time, there was no healthcare system, no NHS. But there was something we've all experienced this past year. There was immense fear in the face of contagious disease. We see that very clearly in the attitudes to leprosy in the Scriptures. How isolating it must have been to go around shouting "Unclean, Unclean" about yourself, as the Book of Leviticus says the leper must.

So, this man in the Gospel takes a risk in approaching Jesus. Others might easily have ignored him and kept well away from him. Jesus does not cast him away. It is a very intimate and moving encounter. Jesus stretches out His hand to him and touches him. This would be unthinkable to everyone else. This surely is the first healing for the man. He is not alone, not abandoned. Jesus really is 'Emmanuel, - God with us'. The healing touch of Jesus turns the man into a super-spreader of the Gospel.

Jesus knows intuitively that His physical health is not threatened in touching this man. In this, is his difference to us. Some people of faith - a very small minority it must be said - have suggested that believers should not worry about catching the virus. They suggest that it will not touch believers. This attitude is misguided. Apart from suggesting that faith acts like some kind of magic which instantly insulates us from all illness and disease, for us Christians, it is also something of a heresy. It equates us completely with the Lord, puts us on the same level. But we believe there is only one Son of God who became Incarnate. You or I are not Him. He is the Lord, we are not. He is the source of all life, of healing. We are not.

Yet we can co-operate with Him in his healing and in seeking to bring life and light in a time of shadow and darkness. This is why I would urge you, if you are in doubt about receiving the vaccine, to reflect seriously on the matter. Although it is a personal decision it is not just a private one. What we choose has consequences not just for ourselves, but for all those around us.

As somebody who is regarded as a potential 'super spreader of the virus', I was deeply grateful to receive the vaccine. I am grateful not just for myself but for all those whom I encounter now or hope to encounter in the future, in my ministry as Bishop. Out of love for them, too, it is good to have received the jab.

After all, in so doing, it will help all of us stay healthy – please God – and be super-spreaders of the Gospel!

+Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth