

## Infection

Like many people I have been in the process of getting jabs. I had my flu and Covid jabs on Tuesday, but also this year I have also had the new RSV jab. That was a theological worry for me. In my world RSV stands for Revised Standard Version – so was I going to be prevented from benefitting from what to my mind is one of the best Bible translations available, and indeed the one we use for our readings in church? Well, no, I don't seem to have been inoculated against it! But seriously, how good it is that science, by the grace of God, is providing us with better protection against diseases that might be at worst life-threatening.

I had written this sermon about infection before the events of the last week, with the publication of the long-awaited Makin Report and the consequent resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. What I wanted to say, and indeed will say, is about some positive things. But it would be irresponsible of me not to face up with you first of all to the dreadful situation we are in, especially the situation of those hundred or more young men and boys who are the victims of John Smyth. His actions have infected our church, and indeed the whole Christian community. And in addition to that we have the clear indication that the Church of England to which we belong has at its highest reaches been complicit in covering up the truth over a period of years. That is another infection from which we are suffering. What can be done to deal with those infections remains to be seen – certainly the resignation of Justin Welby alone cannot achieve it. At least he has had the dignity hopefully to set a much wider process of dealing with these infections in place. Our prayers must be not only for the victims and for the Archbishop, but for all those who must begin to write a new chapter, and to help regain the trust that what has happened has lost us. And if by any chance you read the sermon I posted on the website last week, you will have read that only 54% of people in a recent survey said they trusted clergy. I guess that figure would be even lower now. We have a lot of ground to make up. We all know how an infection in one tooth or one toe can make us feel dreadful all over. This one man's infection has done that to the whole of the Body of Christ.

So let me return to what I had originally intended to say this morning. My paradoxical question for us is - should we avoid infection, or positively seek it? In days gone by, loving parents organised chicken pox parties, in the hope that their children would be infected, and get it all over with. Having myself had not only chicken pox but mumps in my thirties, there was much to be said for that. Of course these days there are jabs which do the job much better, and without the illness to go with it.

But it is not only diseases which are infectious. Laughter is infectious. But so are lots of things. Have you noticed that yawning is infectious? If one person yawns it is sometimes quite hard not to join in. Even physical movements can be infectious. Try this sometime: if you are sitting in a group of people, cross your legs, and see how long it is before someone opposite you does the same. It isn't a conscious copying - it is just that somehow we are geared to mirroring what we see.

So what might we learn from this as Christians? That we can be infected by goodness as well as by bad things. We can catch Christians values and graces without realising. But we can also do so deliberately. A couple of weeks ago I was talking to you about the importance of saints. Those are people who can usefully infect us. As it happens today is the feast of St Hugh of Lincoln. He was Bishop of Lincoln from 1186 to his death on this day in the year 1200. He didn't really want to be a Bishop. He had previously been Prior of the Carthusian priory at Witham in Somerset – but he didn't really want to be elevated to that position either. What he really wanted to to was the be a man of prayer, as he had been as a monk at the Grande Chartreuse in France. And whilst his calling as Prior and Bishop didn't prevent prayer – he thought in some ways it was a distraction. But unlike some saints who we might find it hard to like, if the contemporary accounts of him are to be trusted, it would hard not to like Hugh of Lincoln. This is one description of him: "He was one of the most beautiful spirits that was ever incarnated in human clay. A man of the sunniest cheerfulness, and of remarkable character and leadership." Or listen to this, from his contemporary Adam of Eynsham: "You will find in this one individual all the patience, courtesy, courage, gentleness and other virtues possible in any mortal man. He loves the whole human race like himself: his abundant charity cherishes all men." Lest we should think of him as just an awfully nice chap, let me expand a little on his courage. The King at that time was Henry II, who you recall had been instrumental in the death of Thomas a Becket. Hugh had to take the King to task for various reasons – and having seen what happened to Thomas, that took courage. But he did with courtesy and tact. It was also a time of considerable anti-Semitism. And there was a large community of Jews in Lincoln. He did much to protect them from the prejudices of the time. I could say a lot more, but that gives a flavour of man from whom we might like to catch some infections. Can people say of us in any degree that we exude cheerfulness patience, courage and gentleness? After all those are Christian virtues we find listed in the New Testament.

In the New Testament there is a group of words which are all about infection – although that would never be found as a translation of them in our Bibles today. They are usually translated by something like 'handing on'. So Paul writing to the Corinthians says 'I received from the Lord what I handed on to you.' It came to mean 'tradition' Now sometimes tradition can sound a bit stodgy. But what was meant was that the first disciples handed on to their successors what they had come to believe about Jesus. And in turn those successors handed those thing on to the next generations. We are here today because we are the beneficiaries of that tradition – not only in what came to be written down in the New Testament, but what has been part and parcel of Christian living in a more general sense. We have been infected, and that infection stretches back to the apostles – as we say in the Creed – 'we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church'. We are the inheritors of the apostles. Their infection has been passed down to us.

So we can go a step further. I think it was Dean Inge who first said that 'religion is caught, not taught'. Think about your own faith journey: I would be surprised if most people found that it was teaching that gave them faith more than the example of individuals or a Christian community. That is why we have such a profound calling. It ought to be from each of us that people can be infected with the love of God in Jesus. In order to be

infectious, we have to be in close touch with people who have already been infected. Going back to my own delayed childhood – actually I caught chickenpox from someone at church. I hope I have also been infected by other less painful things from people I have been in church with. I haven't, like any of us, had the privilege of meeting St Hugh of Lincoln and being infected by him. But I have been in contact with a whole series of men and women who have infected me with their love of Christ. They didn't know they were doing it, any more than that person in church knew they were giving me chickenpox. But it happened. So as I end what I have to say, take a few moments in silence to remember the saints (for that is what the New Testament says we *all* are) who have infected you. And then we will pray together that we may be truly and highly infectious to the people we meet day by day.

So let us remember our infectors, if we may call them that.....Heavenly Father, we thank you for those who have handed on to us the good news of Jesus. We thank you for their lives, and their words, and we pray now that you will help us to play our part in handing on the infection they have given us., For Jesus' sake. Amen.