

Dear Friends, Confrères and Consoeurs.

May I somewhat belatedly wish you a Happy New Year.

That is one of the easiest annual wishes to make because none of us can be quite clear as to what we mean. What is a happy year? Is it happy in parts or in whole? Is it laughingly happy? Or is it simply one within which sadness and unhappiness can be mitigated. I like to think that it is one in which the two extremes can be balanced, where fear can be assuaged, and in which laughter can mix with tears.

Looking at the world around us as we launch into 2022, with Covid 19 beginning to reduce in terms of its lethal effects but still with us, with the geopolitical effects of a world in which the major players relentlessly pursue hegemony, with increasing numbers of the world's population facing famine and decimation, it is not hard to identify areas where balance could and should be applied and which would genuinely reduce hardship and fear. But any such mitigation would need to be on a massive scale and as part of a global effort.

Then I began to think more immediately about the ongoing effects of Covid 19 and whether there were elements which we could address more effectively. The first observation is that we are not the first generation to face a plague or to seek how to deal with it. The development of vaccines and physical protection against infection are two examples of a human response which can be further refined and developed. They are at last beginning to play a positive and vital part in combatting Covid; but again the scale on which these are required move them beyond the normal capabilities of our Order here in England and Wales.

This reality must have faced our Order in the past in relation to other plagues in many different parts of the world. The common response in one form or another was isolation. Keeping the infected apart from the non-infected. We see it in relation to plagues throughout history not least in relation to medieval leprosy and Covid today; but it has its own damaging consequences. Human beings are social animals and we draw strength from our interaction. The psychological and mental effects of the loneliness which accompanies isolation both in the isolated and those from whom they are isolated can be severe.

We can imagine it in the work of our Order in medieval times, the leper ringing his or her bell and crying "unclean"; or the self-isolation in the face of Covid today. The forcible breaking up of families to achieve it. The living

alone and even worse the dying alone. In days gone by there were no means of breaking through the impenetrable walls of isolation. Today we have electronics means of communication which can break through those walls – if they are used. But even then we read of family members dying alone, heart wrenching stories, often with severe mental problems. We can't abolish this on our own but where we come across it we can try to break through that loneliness, even if in a very limited way. And in each of those cases we can hopefully ensure that the sufferer can have a happier new year than would otherwise have been the case.

The war against loneliness can be fought on an individual level; by a telephone call or a letter or email. Or simply by keeping in touch with those whose loneliness is caused by the restrictions on the contacts they can have with their Covid infected loved ones. It does not need a great organisation to make this work. Nor does it need to be high profile. It will however make this new year a little happier for some whose outlook would otherwise be one of sad loneliness.

It's worth a thought.

It makes my wish to you not just to have a happier new year yourself but to help others to have one too.

I hope we may meet sometime during the course of the year.

In the meantime within the spirit and prayers of our Order,

yours

Michael Lothian
Grand Prior of the Order of St Lazarus of
Jerusalem
England & Wales