

Not for the Squeamish

It is early June 1348 in a small but busy mountain village well north and east of Avignon, France. It is evening and two merchants, Jean deBrulle and Louis LaMont, good friends, have just finished a hurried dinner. How unlike the French to have such a quick dinner but this is no ordinary evening. Louis speaks first :

“Jean, now what is this great urgency for which you have summoned me?”

Jean replies: “ Louis, it is confirmed, our greatest fear has been confirmed.”

“The pestilence?” whispers Louis.

“Yes, the pestilence – God forbid it- It may soon be upon us.”

“How do you know this – travel in and out of this village has been restricted by order of the Magistrate.”

Jean stands up, moves to the sideboard, removes a small stack of papers and places them before his good friend. Louis looks first at the papers and then back at Jean, confused.

“Louis, they are private letters from my brother.”

“Abbott Maurice, near Avignon ? How did you come by them- as I said, nothing gets through the gates these days?”

“The letters are grouped as you will see, clearly they have been through by several other hands before reaching mine. Given their content, I am amazed any one of them reached me at all, much less all at once. They were wrapped in cloth, rags really; oily, very dirty, several fleas within the wrapping. The guard who delivered them was on duty several days ago. He stated that a rather handsomely dressed but very pale looking rider asked entrance to see me. The guard refused, following the magistrate’s orders, so the rider gave the package to the guard and

insisted that it be delivered immediately to me. This the guard did. The package contained these letters.”

“Well, Jean, is this the source of your certainty about the impending pestilence? And Abbott Maurice, is he well? What news of him ?”

“Louis, the answer to your questions are in those papers. Please do me the favor and read them aloud if you will.”

Louis picks up the top most page and begins reading.

Twenty fifth day, January

My Dear Jean,

Alas, it is now upon us. “It” has been called by several names: the “great pestilence,” the “great mortality,” even the “death cough.” Whatever its name, I believe it now to be in our village. Three deaths were recorded today alone and two funeral masses at the parish church today as well. We, here at the monastery, have been spared so far. The brothers who help serve our little hospital have reported an increase in the number of truly sick townspeople. Brother Alphonse, who leads our contingency to the hospital, reports that if more come in there will be no where to put them but in the hallways on mats ! The hospital has never seen such activity.

The brothers report that the most seriously ill have coughs, frequently coughing up blood. The shortage of clean linen makes it very difficult to keep these patients clean, and often their shirts and sleeves become covered with red tinged sputum. I fear the state of cleanliness at that institution is at a critical low level.

But what is the cause of this infestation ? Why has this calamity come at this particular time? It is reported from King Philip VI's most acclaimed scientists that an untoward alignment of stars and planets has consigned the kingdom to ten months of this horrible disease. Nonsense I say to this notion! A more likely explanation lies in the existence of a just God; purging the land of wicked people, the sloths among us, the cheats and liars ! I have consulted with the local priests and our Bishop and that is the consensus – the black death is the necessary cleansing agent to wash away the unrepentant sinners among us.

Jean, it is my prayer for you, for me and for my charges here at the monastery that we remain faithful to God's commandments and such obedience will protect us from the pestilence and aid us in our work.

In Christ's name, your loving brother,

Maurice

Twenty seventh day, February, Ash Wednesday

Mon Dieu, mon Dieu Jean- where to begin !

The black death is consuming the village! In some it begins as a violent cough the victim doubling over, literally an unstoppable rattling of the entire chest. In others, a more insidious start – a painful egg-sized swelling of the groin or the armpit. In either case the outcome is inevitable – a demise of utter anguish. Only those with flaming fever perish in relative silence.

Once the cough begins or the bubo bulges forth the black death consumes its victims in three or four days.

When I wrote last I mentioned three deaths on that day, it is now three deaths an hour – yes, Jean, - every hour can be heard the wailing of the newly widowed, the cry of infants now motherless, the pathetic chatter of parentless children roving the streets aimlessly.

Last week while walking to the rectory to meet with the pastor of the local parish, I passed a particularly crude hovel and two goats came out of the front door – the door flapping open and shut in the cold winter’s wind. My curiosity got the best of me, I peeked in. The room had likely been ransacked by the animals looking for food. Rats scurried about and fleas were everywhere. Peering into one corner, I spotted the large bloated body of a man lying awkwardly near the tiny hearth. His hands were black as cinders. On a cot in the other corner, caked with filth lie his presumed wife, probably recently dead as her eyes were staring heavenward and her facial expression one of pleading. The fetid stench of death filled the small room and the total lack of dignity in their passing overwhelmed me. I quickly blessed the bodies and left – “fled” would be a more accurate way of expressing my departure !

At the rectory, Father Jacques informed me that he can no longer keep up with the number of funeral masses. The parish cemetery is now full and even if there were available plots, there are so few men left who are willing or able to dig any graves. I asked him how he can continue to minister to the dead and dying. He showed me a document recently sent to him that I had not yet received. The document contained the Papal Seal and I read it quickly. In it, our beloved Pope, Clement, grants general absolution to all the dying; thus lessening the burden on the local priests. Additionally, Clement has attempted to solve the lack of cemetery space by

purchasing more property near Avignon for the sole purpose of burial. In recognizing the inability to keep up with the number of recent deaths, he has consecrated the waters of the Rhone for immediate disposition in the event that final internment in the ground is impossible.

Jean, I need not tell you that already the once beautiful and bucolic Rhone has become the unimaginable; but so has this entire scene – it is all unimaginable, daily I ask myself “How can this be?”

You may wonder how things are here at the monastery. Of the six we sent to the hospital as volunteers three have died of the pestilence. I personally officiated at Brother Alphonse’s funeral mass. To this point, I have not permitted any more to go; I am having difficulty deciding whether or not to augment our mission to the hospital with further novitiates and brothers. It would seem that I am consigning them to their deaths to order them to go but how safe are we within our own walls. Half of our kitchen and laundry staff are gone - either sick or dead. Contrary to what I wrote previously, it appears that the great mortality strikes down the wicked and the just alike. There is no distinction; we have buried too many good people.

We have no suitable explanation for the rampant spread of the pestilence. Our local physicians are powerless; their cerebral methodologies cause one to question the very processes of medical education. The continual dietary changes they recommend have served only to sicken more people. The treatments and advice are so uneven, so haphazard, I can nearly imagine them next asking us to bathe more frequently ! And as unsuccessful as our physicians have been, we clergy - I must confess - have been nearly as impotent against this plague.

Jean, I tell you alone this potential failing of mine. I never thought I would see the day when I would begin to doubt the efficacy of prayer. But nor did I ever expect to see the day

when bodies heaved into the Rhone constitutes a proper burial, when passing carts carry the scores of daily dead instead of fruits and grain, when sick family members suffer alone and die in squalor.

Mon Dieu, mon Dieu Jean, where will it end ?

Your loving brother,

Maurice

Fifteenth day March

My dear brother,

In normal circumstances we await the arrival of spring with happy expectations, great hopes and a good riddance to the foul weather of winter. In normal circumstances, the local farmers would be pruning their fields in preparation for planting, the local merchants restocking their shelves as delivery carts from the port cities begin to arrive again, and we here at the monastery would engage in more rigorous spiritual exercises as we look toward Holy Week and Easter itself. Those happened in normal times, Jean, nothing now happening could be remotely considered “normal”.

There are few farmers left and many of the abandoned fields now serve as new cemeteries. In our village only two merchants have survived and they do commerce by appointment only. The other stands and shops are vacant – totally vacant; proprietors all dead. And here at the monastery, the place now resembles a part time hospital and full time mortuary. Many more of the brothers and novitiates have succumbed to the plague since last I wrote to you.

The few that are still healthy tend not only to their sick brothers, but now sick townspeople as well. I am embarrassed to admit that I allow only the religious to be buried here at the monastery cemetery. The deceased townsfolk are loaded onto the death carts which come by once a day. I am equally embarrassed to admit that I do not ask the cart drivers where they are taking the fallen - I can only imagine the callous dispatch of these scores into their watery grave of the Rhone.

The refectory, which used to hum at meal time with the whispering voices of spirited novitiates and seasoned monks, discussing studies, readings or even the quality of our wine, is now silent. Our remaining healthy eat in silence, self-imposed. I fear, Jean, that a type of collective pessimism or depression has enveloped our spiritual community. When our prayers proclaim the “mercy of God” no one feels it. When at Mass and we receive Communion - the very Body of Christ - it seems received as cold porridge. When evening prayers encourage us to be at rest and at peace knowing that God loves us, we can think only of the many faithful we witnessed finding their eternal rest that day but had found no peace in attaining it. We have become despondent.

Even simple joys, like Church bells are now denied us. The Bishop has ordered the bells to be silenced citing as reason that too many funeral chimes were diminishing the spirit of the faithful.

The only respite I have had from the ravages of death occurred last week in Avignon. I was there at a meeting of clerics to discuss the obvious staffing shortages at many of the parishes.

Perhaps her arrival was known to the local population but the opulent procession of Queen Joanna of Naples and Sicily, and her entourage, was a complete surprise to me. Apparently, she was here in Avignon to defend herself, in front of the Pope himself and the many Cardinals, against the charges of murder. Those charges were made by King Louis of Hungary, who was represented by a large contingency of Hungarian nobles.

Recall, Jean, that Joanna had been married to King Louis' brother, Prince Andreas. Not long after she married the prince Andreas was murdered, found hanging from the balcony of a convent near Naples. This murder occurred at least two years ago but the Hungarians have ever since placed the blame on Queen Joanna, accusing her of being the mastermind behind the plot.

I was able to squeeze into the papal hall the day of the hearing. Before Pope Clement stood the angry looking Hungarian contingency on one side, and opposite stood the most radiant beauty I have ever seen, Queen Joanna was of a most imperial bearing. The arguments were heard both for and against her and I must say the Hungarians were quite forceful and convincing. However, Clement, either stricken by the beauty and humble character of Joanna or, drawing upon a divine wisdom that only he possessed, judged her to be innocent of all charges! A great number in the hall were dumbfounded at this proclamation.

As I left the hearing, I found it truly odd that such pageantry and pomp could occur over a single death which occurred several years before when now one can scarcely walk any of the public streets without having to step over the scattered bodies of the dead not yet loaded onto the carts.

But perhaps Avignon needed the diversion from the horrors surrounding us all. I confess that in the grandeur of the papal hall I did momentarily forget the many faces of death that haunt my quieter moments. It did not take long to return to the realities of our time.

On my return trip to the monastery I stopped for noon prayer at a small convent to which I had been on many of my previous trips to and from Avignon. To my surprise the main gate was locked. I called out and a short ill-kept man came forth from the guard quarters. It took a few moments but I recognized him as the caretaker of the grounds. Since last I had seen him he now looked inordinately old and scared, reeking of filth. He informed me that the convent was closed, the last two sisters had most recently been taken to the local hospital. He sobbed a little as he told me he hoped they would recover. He knelt down and continued sobbing as I blessed him. I tried to comfort him by praying aloud for the prompt and full recovery of the two sisters.

But Jean, in these times, hospitals are places to die, no one – no one - ever returns from them. And if they did it would be called a miracle, but I am fast losing my belief in such things.

Be well, Jean

Maurice

April

My dear brother,

I suspect where you are, is as yet, unaffected by the pestilence. I pray to God that you and your family are spared this travesty. Since last I wrote nothing has abated. The number of deaths remains frighteningly high and the remaining few town officials cannot keep up with their

duties. I go out only as required now; I have fatigued of feigning disinterest when stepping over a dead animal or deceased villager. I detest admitting it, but it is true – my emotions are as lifeless as the corpses on the carts. Too many disgusting scenes and circumstances have served to extinguish my sensitivities.

Easter, usually a joyous time at the monastery and throughout the village, was met this year without joy, without church bells and without nearly half the usual faithful at the vigil services. Truly, Jean, our chapel was half full at Easter; last year there were many standing outside the portals.

In addition to early Easter morning mass for the brothers and novitiates, I also had Easter Mass at the local parish - Father Philipe died two weeks ago. I am now one of three priests left in the entire village ! Preparing for that parish Easter Mass was very difficult. I know Father Philipe had been a wonderful homilist and I was told his final sermons were still sprinkled with hope. I sat for hours, literally hours, trying to think of anything hopeful; anything at all. All I could think of was how we have been forsaken; abandoned; how mercy and dignity have been torn from our village; how our scientists and astrologists have failed us, how God himself, has ceased gazing with delight on his creation and has withdrawn his loving care.

Jean, those were my thoughts for an Easter sermon ! But be assured, I did not yield to such a temptation. Instead in my homily I tried to convince the sparse congregation of the blessed Resurrection that awaits all of the faithful who have died with Christ's love in their heart. I am not sure I believe it myself anymore.

Especially when I tell you of reports from Toulon. Jean, as you know, Holy Week has traditionally been a difficult time for Jews living in villages and especially in larger cities.

Harassment, vandalism, and occasional personal violence against the Jews have been rather typical during Holy Week. I personally find this rather senseless, particularly as their observance of Passover-a bit of shared history-occurs simultaneously, and, I must say without fanfare. But this year the attacks on the Jews have been beyond vicious. In Toulon and several other surrounding towns the Jews are being pulled from their houses - husbands, wives, children, elderly - all are being herded into groups and given the absurd choice to accept Christian baptism or be put to death. Jean, imagine the unimaginable - we are suffering the worst plague in anyone's memory; death already surrounds us. The disease kills Jews and Christians alike, no distinction; yet these Christian zealots are claiming the Jews responsible for the plague, stating that the Jews are poisoning the wells in each village !

In Toulon, fires were built and the choice was given; Baptism or the flames. The vast majority of the Jews chose the flames ! It is a bravery that I should think would have shamed the zealots, disbanded them and put an end to such nonsense. Just the opposite ! The senseless burnings seem to excite even more senseless hatred. Pope Clement attempted to squelch these uprisings; his Papal Bull, condemning the mistreatment and murder of the Jews, was strongly worded, but alas, perhaps too late to have any real affect. The damage had been done - besides, who was there to enforce his edict of tolerance ? I wrote earlier that I am one of three clerics left in our village. In some, there are no priests left. The police forces have been decimated by the pestilence and, in truth, those police left are mostly Christian and would likely be, at best, indifferent to the violence. Indeed, Jean, the plight of the Jews is reprehensible. If only some sense could be made of this plague. If only some treatment for it could be discovered. If only God would turn to his people once more and let his face shine upon us and rid us of this pestilence and the abhorrent behavior it breeds.

Your brother,

Maurice

Eleventh day, May

My dear brother Jean,

I have heard no response from you at all - I suspect your village has sealed its gates. Perhaps you may be spared. I pray that it is so.

As you may have heard, the Pope has fled Avignon for his retreat further north on the Rhone. Had this been several months ago I would have found this abandonment intolerable. However, Jean, Clement did not abandon, at least initially. And why stay in Avignon? At least half of the population has perished. I am told the streets are still afoul with filth and scattered with corpses. The public employees have been so decimated by this unending pestilence that there are not persons enough to maintain any sort of sanitation, which brings me to our present situation.

At this point, I estimate that two out of every three or four of my village have met their demise. In venturing out the streets are nearly deserted. Occasional corpses can be seen, now serving to fatten what have become aggressive pigs and dogs that trudge obnoxiously through the alleys and roads. The farmers are dead, the police are few, and the remaining are despondent.

When I do encounter a fellow villager we do say "Bonjour" but it is perfunctory. There is no meaning or feeling to it. If the encounter passes beyond the "faux" greeting, the conversation inevitably involves cursing and decrying the great pestilence. But even that, Jean, is

nearly void of any real passion. We are depleted Jean, we have seen too much- we few who have survived to this moment have been marched through hell and all its terrors and have only each other to rely on - and who can be relied upon? The sick are abandoned, the dead lay unburied. The healthy avoid both. It is a vicious cycle, a downward spiral, a nearly Godless situation.

But, believe it or not, Jean, a few of us have elected to stay in this Godforsaken village. One of the village recorders, Monsieur L'Enfant - you may remember him from our childhood Jean, he was a few years older than you but from our village - he has insisted on remaining in the town to help with the transmission of properties. I admire his resolve in attempting to maintain some sense of order in the Records Office, and to ensure the proper passage of properties to the rightful heirs.

And our only remaining surgeon, Monsieur Doctor Limoux did not abandon as he might have; as the departing papal entourage passed near our village he was invited to join Clement's thinning medical corp - but he declined. He told me that although he had trained in Paris, he was born in this village and intended to die here if God willed it. His death is one of the few, luckily, that God has not, as yet, willed. He is a blessing to those of us remaining and spends countless hours at the hospital.

And, Jean, several of our remaining police are steadfast in their commitment to our village; they would not think of leaving.

It is a minor blessing but a blessing nonetheless that we have such commitment from this small band of persons. Believe me, Jean, when I tell you that what little stability and civility of our day to day lives remains is because of this dedicated remnant of humanitarian servants.

And what of me? I will tend to my devastated flock to the end. I have been spared thus far and can only ask why? The monastery has but ten monks left alive. We still manage to pray together at least three times a day. I find comfort in that - it seems the only moments of peace. And whether God hears us or not - I told you before that I fear God is not listening - the sense of community with my brothers has become enough for me to see through this hellish existence.

In an earlier letter I wrote that our monastery had been transformed to a hospital and mortuary; well, of late, it is now transforming into an orphanage. Youth of all ages with no where to go, no relatives with which to stay, are now taken in here at the monastery. Jean, I do not know what else to do. We ask them to help with the daily chores, especially in the kitchen. Brother Lucius, is attempting to plant a garden but all of the field hands in our congregation have succumbed. However, one of our orphans is the son of a deceased farmer and has been most helpful in getting the small garden started.

Imagine that, Jean, a fifteen year old boy is now in charge of our little garden; directing two monks thrice his age! The world is upside down.

It is difficult to know what to do with the smaller children. After basic chores I have taken to holding classes or sessions with those old enough to speak and reason. Sometimes I teach them prayers, other times I tell stories; it is impossible to do much more. The littlest ones are a sad sight indeed, their faces are dirty and expressionless. I ask myself daily - what is life teaching them? What sense can possibly be made of such rampant sickness and death in the mind of a six or seven year old? This black death exasperates me.

Of the stories that I tell, the one about the bootmaker and his son - remember it Jean?- is a favorite of the children; often they ask me to tell it twice - I always oblige. It does me well to see a few smiles on the otherwise dour faces.

Yes, Jean, I will definitely remain here at the monastery. More changes have occurred in the last six months than in the last century. If I survive this pestilence I may have to write more specifically about it, or, at least with respect to its impact on our village.

I trust that you are well and that I may hear from you soon. I continue to write because I am told that letters from clerics and village officials are still being delivered but who can be sure in these times. Who can be sure of anything at all.

Your brother,

Maurice

Louis places the final letter on the table.

For several moments Jean and Louis stare at each other in silence. Finally, Louis asks:

“Jean, is that the final letter, are you sure there are no more?”

“Yes, Louis, other letters may have been detained or confiscated, but I have no more.”

“What are we to do Jean? Can we be spared from this horror” Our mountains about us, can they protect us ?”

Jean stands up and looks directly into Louis' eyes. He begins to unfasten his jacket. Louis looks at him oddly. Jean then unbuttons his shirt and removes his right arm from both jacket and shirt exposing his shoulder.

Louis' eyes widen and he whispers "No, no" as Jean lifts his arm and exposes the egg-sized, red swelling in his axilla.

Postscript or Postmortem

You may wonder if Louis stayed with Jean or ran from the room. Whatever he did the outcome for both was likely the same; death . . . as it was for at least one third of the European and Eurasian population during that time. It was not until five hundred years later, in 1894 that Alexander Yersin identified the bacterial pathogen, *Yersinia Pestis*, and another fifty years after that before the disease could be effectively treated with antibiotics!

The host for the bacterium is the black rat. The transmitting vector is the common rat flea and given the filth and crowded conditions in the mid fourteen century Europe, both were present in large numbers.

When sleeping with or near your livestock was commonplace, when formal bathing and clothing changes occurred once a year whether it was needed or not, and when hurling feces, urine and other bodily effluent out into the public streets constituted standard waste removal, it is no wonder that rats and fleas proliferated. There was no understanding of "hygiene" as we know

it today. And faith was placed in God and church, in medicine, and in the King's scientists, and each of these were victims - in their own way - of the plague as well.

We look back and shake our heads; how ignorant they were, how non-empirical, how totally lacking in scientific method. How could the churchmen think that mankind was being punished ! How could the King's scientists reason that an alignment of the stars and planets precipitated the great pestilence! How could the physicians of that era be so blind to what was right before their eyes!

Let us fast forward five hundred years to the year 2500; what will those beings think of us? Where are our own "blindspots" ? What basic principles of science, bacteriology and virology do we now accept as "gospel" truth, as so very obvious, which, five hundred years from now will be tantamount to "leeching" !

