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| **12th October 2014** |
| **Mark 1.40-45** |

There was a health food shop that had a sign outside that said ‘closed due to ill health’.

 A nightclub had a sign that said ‘Smarts is the most exclusive nightclub in town – everyone welcome’

A plumber’s van had the sign on the side that said ‘we repair what your husband fixed’.

Another plumber had the caption ‘don’t sleep with a drip, call a plumber’

A plastic surgeon advertised by saying ‘come to us and let us pick your nose’.

An electrician had a sign saying ‘let me remove your shorts’

An optician‘s sign said ‘if you don’t see what you are looking for, you have come to the right place’

A sign outside a handyman’s shop ‘we can repair anything: knock hard the bell doesn’t work’

And finally a sign on the door to the maternity ward imply said ‘push, push push!

Jesus did signs that pointed to the deep realities of his authority and the values of his kingdom. The story today as we continue to consider the healing ministry of Jesus’s, is the story of the healing of the leper. It gives us many signs to look for.

The church is a supporter of the Leprosy Mission. We usually raise something in the region of £800 for them each year, mainly through the coordination of Peggy. They do essential work in some of the poorest regions of the world helping to heal people from Leprosy.

The people in Bible times didn’t know what we know about leprosy. They really didn't understand it; they really had no means to. How could they possibly know that it was contagious only after long periods of very close contact? The only thing they knew about it was what it looked like and what it did to a person in the advanced stages. That they knew well. They understood how it maimed and disfigured. And that was enough for fear to take over.

We perhaps at this moment in time can appreciate the fear that accompanied skin diseases in the ancient world of Jesus. The Ebola epidemic is frightening.

What happens when fear takes over is people do not act, they react. Reactions to leprosy were both swift and cruel. In times not far removed from our own, people would be put to death by their own family. It seems incredible to us today, but on the edge of every large city in the ancient world huge pits were dug, and in those pits lived the lepers of the community.

And if, by some remote possibility, they did escape this hovel and venture out into the streets, they would be quickly greeted with shouts of "leper," accompanied by stones to make them keep their distance. In Jesus' day a leper by law could not get within fifty yards of a clean person. So this was the heart of the matter. Not only did these wretched poor people have to endure the trials of an incurable affliction, they also were isolated from society and kept from the community of faith. The horror of disease, a lifestyle of loneliness, isolation and hopelessness--where could they find hope? The only friend a leper had was God himself. In this life they were doomed. It was walking death.

This, then, is the background of the leper we meet this morning. It is not a million miles from what is happening in West Africa and threatens to encroach onto our soil. What can we learn from this man's tragic story? What we can learn about the healing ministry of Jesus and by implication, that of the church. What are the signs for us?

***First of all the man was desperate for healing***. He was prepared for healing. He was willing to risk embarrassment, censure, and worse – so desperate was he for healing. He risked people’s hostile stare, maybe even their stones, to get near to Jesus. If someone wants to get well – how desperate are they to get well. Are they really committed to their healing?

You go to the doctor and the doctor says take this medicine, have this diet, d this exercise, cut out this bad stuff from your life. If you are serious about your healing then you’ll do it?

This man is so serious about his healing that he comes to Jesus. The spiritual dimension of healing is important as much as the physical dimension. Do we have the right spiritual disposition. Are we right with God; are we open to receive again the work of Christ in our life?

Our Ignite conference on Friday and Saturday is a good opportunity to come and consider the spiritual dimensions to our faith. We live in a material world, in a secular society, that so stresses the rational and what you can see and touch that it doesn’t come naturally to us to consider the spiritual. In other parts of the world, such as in Africa, the material and the spiritual are interrelated and taken for granted.

I was brought up in a United Reformed Church and there was virtually no teaching or understanding of the role or the work of the Holy Spirit. He was the forgotten, overlooked member of the Trinity: Father Son and the other one… let’s not talk about him. Faith was all about following Christ, loving your neighbouring, doing good, seeking just world. I’m not knocking any of that – it’s just that there’s more. God seeks to empower us to be his church. More often than not we go about it in our own power – which will get us so far and may give us some flattering achievements, but we are called to co-operate with the Spirit and through his power do much more. Sometimes you just come to the end of your human resources and you need God’s help, God’s empowerment.

Richard Hutchinson was a top oil executive and a member of the Presbyterian Church in the USA. He was commissioned to write a report about the state of the church and this was one of his conclusions:

*‘Management techniques are God given tools, available for the church’s use. But far more basic re the God given characteristics of the church itself – its unique nature as the people of God and its unique gift, the Holy Spirit. The fatal error for the church is to employ management techniques as if it were just another human organization in pursuit of human goals. The fatal error is to focus on oiling the organisational wheel, without attention to the wheel within the wheel (the Holy Spirit) who is the basic power source.’*

Jesus was baptised with the Holy Spirit at the start of his ministry and in the Spirit’s power resisted temptation and then healed and delivered and liberated the people of his day. After his resurrection he told his disciples at his ascension to heaven to wait until they would be clothed with power from on high and then they would be enabled to be his witnesses. When you read the book of Acts you see the disciples in the power of the Spirit going out to change the world.

Paul Stokes, will no doubt be teaching all this on Friday evening and Saturday and how to be open to the Spirits work in our lives and our church. We need help. Are we desperate enough for it? Are we searching for that spiritual life?

I had become a church member when I was 18 years old and accepted Christ as my Lord, as we say in our membership vows. I then went off to university and started mixing with all sorts of Christians, which was a real eye-opener. Many of them talked about having received the Holy Spirit, or having been baptised in the Holy Spirit. Initially I thought they were weird and kept them at arm’s length. However as I observed from a distance I had to acknowledge that they seemed to have something. Eventually, and I took the best part of a year – I m a cautious and sceptical person at times, eventually I plucked up the courage, maybe born out of desperation, but also out of genuine desire, to experience more of the Holy Spirit in my life. I remember getting down on my knees in the middle of the University Park (no-one was around I hasten to add, thus minimising the embarrassment) and asking God to fill me now. Nothing happened. No blinding lights, visions, no tongues of fire. However over the coming weeks and months I did notice a gradual confidence, and assurance in the gospel, a closer walk with God, a bolder attitude in being prepared to share my faith, a new energy for my Christian life.

So let me just encourage you if you are in two minds about coming along to one of the Ignite events – to give it a go. Paul stokes won’t bite and the Holy Spirit is usually very gentle with us.

The man with leprosy was desperate for help and for healing. Healing is a mystery. We don't fully understand it. All we can do is to prepare our bodies to receive it. That's what doctors do. They do it with surgery, with medicine, and therapy. They prepare our bodies to receive the gift of healing.

In a spiritual sense that's all we can do too. We can prepare to receive the gift through faith, through prayer, and through openness to the power of God in whatever way God works. We prepare expectantly.

**Secondly this man with leprosy comes to Jesus and ask him ‘If you choose you can make me clean. Jesus says I choose to heal you.**

*The first readers of Mark’s gospel would have understood that request. It was believed that only God could heal at will. If God chooses to heal - he could heal you. There is the mystery of suffering – if God is good, why do people suffer – why are people unwell. The Bible has inevitably offered a few reasons – because of our sin – the way we live our lives can make us ill, the devil can make us ill, spiritual forces that are malign and evil can be at work causing affliction and harm, the way the world is, viruses, bacteria, the processes of evolution produces change and decay and create a world where one day our bodies will wear out, where death is an ever present feature – this is the way the world is.*

*But it is a mystery. Just read the book of Job – the story of a good man who got ill. In the end God confronted him and told him to just accept the mystery – accept that Job wasn’t God, he hadn’t formed the world or knew how it should run, so keep silent before the Creator of all. Job came to a resigned acceptance that God is God and he wasn’t. He had a right old tussle with the almighty. A frank and honest exchange would be a euphemistic way of describing their dialogue.*

*Prayer needs honesty otherwise it’s not real relating. Some people have problems dealing with their anger. There is always the fear that if you express your anger in a relationship the other person will reject you. God has always promised to be there. So don’t be false with him – because only the truth will set you free. Job was honest with God but in the end Job came to a resigned acceptance of his situation. He was put in his place. Sometimes we all need putting in our place. We are not in control. God is. Can we ultimately trust God? Can we leave the choosing with God?*

This man with leprosy comes in desperation to Jesus – if you choose… he pleads.

Jesus is filled with compassion, or great pity, or anger, as different versions translate. The reason for anger is not clear – was it anger towards the man, towards his leprosy, to the evil that had caused it, to the evil of the social context that excluded him from society? Whatever word you use they all convey as great stirring of passion within Jesus. He wasn’t lukewarm about this. He was passionate about people getting healed. ‘I do choose’ he replies.

So many people think that somehow God is punishing them or got it in for them somehow. Leslie Weatherhead said if God sent suffering, then Jesus, in his mission of alleviating suffering, was working in direct contravention to the will of God – which is unthinkable. It is God’s will for you to be healed – but of course always in God’s time and choosing.

Now was the time for this man’s healing. Jesus reached out his hand and touched him. In the New Testament (e.g. Acts 6, 8, 13 Mark 6) we see the touch of a person’s hands in prayer communicates power. We are instructed to pray for each other with the laying on of hands – it symbolises, sacramentally, in a tangible way, the intangible work of God grace and power in our lives.

**Thirdly, Jesus always met men and women on the level of their need, regardless of who they were or what they had done**. He met everyone as human beings, never as stereotypes. Stereotypes were as powerful then as they are now. Once a label is placed on a person the human being vanishes. Many labels were given to people in the New Testament -- such labels as tax collector, Samaritan, Roman soldier, prostitute, rich young man, Pharisee, sinner or publican. They all appear in the gospel narrative, and every time Jesus completely ignores the label and deals with the person. This is certainly true of his encounters with Matthew, Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, and Nicodemus.

 Jesus knew the ugly side of society -- the brutality of the occupation, the corruption of the tax system, the racial prejudices, the economic injustice, the religious hypocrisy, and the sexual degradation. But never once did these factors blind him to the reality of the human being, the unique son or daughter of God he saw before him."

Think of the labels we may give people today: immigrant, (big one at the moment – by all means have an adult conversation about immigration – but let us never reduce immigrants to sub humnan level) - asylum seeker, mentally ill, disabled, ex-offender, child abuser…etc. Jesus sees beyond the label to the person who however flawed, is still created in the image of God.

**Fourthly, by making him clean Jesus was restoring this man to community**. We need a community around us.

Despite all its faults, thank God for the church. In this individualised and virtual world – where people have community online – where you can have a digital shoulder to cry on but not a real one - the church offers a real community that knows when you’re sick.

I seem to be doing lots of funerals at the moment, and I apologise if I haven’t been as active in other areas of church life. But I notice some of you turn up to these funerals and you hardly know the deceased but you come to offer support and express the church’s care. I’m grateful.

We have another funeral this afternoon, which is the tragic death of a young father , called Rodwell, who took his own life, only five months after we did the funeral for his two year old daughter. Please pray for his brother Andrew, his sister Anisar, his mother Nyengeterai and wife Aga. His body is being taken back to his native Zimbabawe this week, but his friends are gathering here this afternoon for a memorial service for him.

Everyone needs a community to love them and support them, especially at times of tragedy and suffering. Jesus is in the business of re-connecting people and bringing them into community.

The community of Jesus’ day had rules. It had religious rules. They were in the Bible. Leviticus 13 – don’t touch a person with leprosy – keep your distance – they are unclean. Jesus disregarded the law. He abandoned a biblical principle! Jesus saw fit to change biblical principles. Then he showed respect for other parts of the bible by obeying the commands to use a priest to verify the healing and declare that the man was clean and to be restored to the community.

The Bible is used to exclude people, to hurt people, to condemn people, to judge people. We always need to be cautious in reading it at face value. We need the spirit of Christ to guide us into truth. Where is the word that brings reconciliation, healing, salvation? God is in the business of community.

**Last of all, fifthly, healing should make you a new person and reconnect you to God and to others. When that happens you can’t stop but shout praise.**

There is a story of a farmer who was sitting with his wife one evening on the porch, looking at the beautiful valley laid out before them. Everything about the moment was filled with peace. At last the farmer spoke quietly, as if reluctant to break the spell. "Sarah," he said, "we've had a lot of ups and downs together during these forty years, and when I've thought of all you've meant to me, sometimes it's been almost more than I could do to keep from telling you."

 Sometimes things just "leak" out of us, no matter how hard we try to plug them up.

 Biblical scholars have long noted the apparent theme of a "messianic secret" in Mark's gospel. Jesus didn’t want his real identity to be made known until the time was right.

Now , is always the time to bring people to Jesus. Because he is the one who can help. When you have been healed you just can’t stop it. Praise leaks out of you.

 In a large and very formal church a particular woman visited one Sunday who just wasn't with the program. She kept shouting out "Amen," during the sermon. One of the ushers hushed her, but she kept shouting "Amen" until finally the usher approached her and, in a loud whisper asked, "Madam, what are you doing?"

"I'm praising the Lord," she said.

To which he responded, "Well, church is no place for that sort of thing."

I hope our church will be a place of continual praise for the works of the Lord.

Like this man with leprosy may we be committed to seeking healing for ourselves and for others.

May we be aware that it is God’s will and delight that we should be well and whole.

May we reach out to the lepers of our society – those whom others shun; those whom others think are unclean. Reach out and touch – even if it breaks the rules, even if it offends the religious types!

May we do all we can to restore each other to community – with each other and with God.

May we not stop giving praise to God who does wonderful things -the God who heals.