**17th March 2013**

**Luke 17.11-19**

This time of year annual General Meetings seem to abound. The AGM is always an opportunity to say thank you for everyone’s efforts in the last year and also to acknowledge our gratitude to God for his provision and grace and strength to us in the last year. AGM’s are important to reflect on what has gone, to give thanks and to look ahead with expectancy and faith, in the light of what has gone before.

Our passage today is about healing and also about gratitude. Ten lepers get cured, although arguable only one gets healed. Ten lepers get cured but only one comes back to thank Jesus and praise God.

We want our children and grandchildren to learn have a sense of thanksgiving in their hearts, for all the little gifts that life offers, and we begin to teach them young. It can be a struggle. Grandpa and grandma arrive, for Christmas, bringing in a huge carload of Christmas presents for everyone. And the biggest one under the tree this year is for the grandson. It’s Christmas Eve; he rips into that package; and he discovers a train set which is immediately set up and he begins playing with it, racing the train around the tracks as fast as he can. Meanwhile, the parents are persistently coaching their boy, “make sure you say thank you to Grandma and Grandpa.”.....which the grandchild does with a cursory hug and shout, as he is happily focused on playing with his new train. The parents and grandparents would like more signs of appreciation, but, “oh well.”

It’s birthday time and Grandpa and Grandma send their annual birthday card to their granddaughter from their faraway city, and granddaughter tears the envelope open, barely reading the front page of the card and merely glancing at the poem inside and grabs at the money, or maybe a check. Granddaughter needs and wants that money. She is so very happy that Grandpa and Grandma remembered her birthday in this way. Mother says, “Make sure you write a thank you note to Grandma and Grandpa.” A week later, the mother again asks her daughter to write the note, with the same lack of response from her daughter. It is now two weeks later and there is a conflict brewing, Mom is mad, because that note has not been written.

We all want our children and grandchildren and ourselves to have this deep feeling of appreciation inside, not out of duty, not out of politeness or being proper. Rather, we want them to know the deep felt appreciation for the little and big things of life; that this is a highly desirable quality. We want that miracle to occur in our children and grandchildren, the miracle of deep and genuine thanksgiving.

“Where are the other nine,” Jesus asked. Did I not heal ten lepers? Where are the other nine? Did only one come back to give praise to God except this foreigner? Go on your way – your faith has healed you’

There are lots of fine details in this passage – let me pick up on some of them briefly:

Leprosy was the dreaded disease of Jesus’ day, just as cancer and coronaries are the dreaded diseases of our day. Today, none of us want to hear the “C” word from our doctor about our medical condition. And that’s the way it was in Jesus’ day about leprosy. Nobody wanted to hear the “L” word.

Such lepers are forced out and forced to fend for themselves. In the story for today, a group of ten lepers were in a small leper colony in a small village outside of Jerusalem. Jesus comes by, and the lepers began shouting to him: “Jesus, master have pity on us’

The request for pity is actually the Greek word for mercy (*eleison* ) could simple be a request for money. Some forms of this word mean "to give alms" or "to give money to the needy." If so, these lepers got more than they could have hoped -- no money, but cleansing, which brought with it restoration to society.

There is real debate at the moment about benefit changes to our society and fears of more children landing into poverty. It is cause for concern. But I would suggest the deeper concern is not just about contributing money to the needy, but to seek people’s restoration to society? How can people, whether they are on benefits, or millionaires, feel connected to one another and each other’s keeper instead of one group victimising the other group for society’s ills – That is not going to get us anywhere except make us more a divided, fractious, diseased community. Jesus was about re-humanising people and restoring community. That is the healing act in the cleansing of the lepers.

There is a time to cry out loudly to God (and others), "Lord have mercy." Those who don't have the necessities of life, those who are sick and ailing, their cry is not one of thanksgiving, but like these lepers cry out for mercy. There are times when we should not be thankful for the situations we are in. There are times when our response is to seek help from God and others. Sometimes of course people only pray to God when they are in need.

Back in this passage verse 14: Jesus sees them. The use of the word "see" means more than just physical sight -- it means on the one hand perceiving the opportunity to be merciful toward another, and on the other hand the recognition that God's mercy can touch one’s life. The one leper who turned back to Jesus sees that he is cured of leprosy – but sees a deeper truth than the physical reality – sees beyond it to the one who has healed him.

The two instances of ‘seeing’ each represent challenges for the believer. What do we see, and what do we do when we see? The first instance is the recognition of the need of others. Sometimes persons in need simply do not catch our attention. An irritable co-worker may be facing a health problem or struggling with a difficult family situation. Who notices an immigrant far from home and family, or the person separated from family during the holidays? At other times, we simply pass by persons whose lives are a day-to-day struggle for subsistence or for emotional stability. Who sees?

The second question goes to the heart of the story. What do you *do* when you see? Jesus saw need and acted to meet it. When the leper saw healing, he did not just celebrate his good fortune; he returned to praise God and fall on his face before Jesus.

Gratitude may be the purest measure of one's character and spiritual condition. The absence of the ability to be grateful reveals self-centeredness or the attitude that I deserve more than I ever get, so I do not need to be grateful.

The result and irony of the miracle was to drive these lepers away from God.” When they needed God, they were close to God; but when they didn’t need God, they were off busy being well. The strange irony of the healing was to drive them away from God.

The nine lepers got the cure, but not the healer; they experienced a miracle but not the miracle worker; they received the gift but didn’t know and love the giver. It reminds me of the grandson I mentioned at Christmas time, so busy playing with his new train, that he is not really aware of Grandma and Grandpa who came to see him and spend time with him and love him.

Which is why Jesus seems to point out the difference between receiving a cure – wow my leprosy has gone... and a healing, or being saved – which he says to the leper who came back to thank him.

It was a foreigner, a Samaritan, an outsider of the religious establishment who was the only one who paused....remembered.....and came back to Jesus to say thank you. Remember how Jesus used the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate the second greatest commandment – love your neighbour. Jesus here tells another Samaritan how he has fulfilled the first and greatest commandment ‘love the lord your God’. True worship is recognising when God is active. Of course the mystery of faith is that some will be cured of their illness and praise God and some will be cured of their illness and not praise God.

New Pope has been elected. By all accounts he knows about poverty having worked in the slums of Buenos Aires and has a heart for the poor. We must pray for him and our brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church. One of his first comments was that he didn’t want the church just becoming a Compassionate NGO (non-Governmental Organisation) but they need also to be focused too on the spiritual mission of the gospel. Love God... love your neighbour – of course you love God by loving your neighbour… but we do need fist of all that disposition of the heart, mind and soul to acknowledge our creator and sustainer, the one who gives us life from whom all our good gifts come. It’s not mine – it’s all his – live life with open hands. Live a life of gratitude. Then you will be whole, healed, saved, and free.

Let me end with a short testimony from Barbara Sholis who is a pastor of a Methodist Church in the United States as she comments on this passage in the light of her own experience:

There are moments when you just know what’s coming next. No one has to confirm it for you; the feeling in your gut is confirmation enough. "Barbara, you do have breast cancer," the surgeon said..

As the next day dawned, the idea of cancer began to sink in. I cried as I got out of bed. I cried in the shower. I cried putting on my makeup. I cried driving to work. I sat at my desk and couldn’t stop the flow of tears. I could only see the word "cancer" staring back from the computer screen. While I sat there, paralyzed with fear, a colleague knocked lightly on my door: "Hey Barb, Dr. Stone is in the library." A busy doctor stopping by on a Friday morning to return a book to the church library -- how often does that happen? Although she is not my doctor, I pulled her into my office as if I’d been thrown a life preserver. Reaching out with compassion, she brought Christ the Healer to me.

The next week, I spent time with my spiritual director. As shock muffled my ability to experience God’s abiding presence with me, my director invited me to open myself to discover all the ways God was reassuring me that I was not walking this journey by myself. Driving home I formed this prayer for guidance: "Seek God, see God, choose life."

When chemotherapy causes your hair to fall out, robs you of your energy and fills your mouth with sores, you begin to develop empathy with the ten lepers. There is no hiding the fact that you are diseased. Your cancer walks into the room before you do and people who know better still flinch -- as they did before lepers, who were made to live outside the community, who had to beg for survival.

But Jesus, approaching the village, sees the lepers and doesn’t flinch; he shows compassion. While most walk by and choose to look away, Jesus chooses to see their misery and hear their calls for healing. As was the religious practice, he sends them to the priests. Luke tells us: "And as they went, they were made clean."

Can you imagine experiencing a miraculous healing? I am sure the lepers were speechless, overwhelmed with the shock of disbelief at their good fortune. One moment they were living a dreadful, diseased, quarantined existence, and then, in the time it took to walk to the village priest, their skin healed, their vision cleared, their sores dried up. The local priest sounded the "all clear," freeing them to return to society, to their homes, to a productive life. If you think about your own probable reaction, it is hard to blame the lepers for scattering to the wind and leaving the past behind them like a bad dream.

But Luke tells us that one leper, the Samaritan, the foreigner, upon seeing before his eyes the miraculous healing of his body, is overcome with gratitude. He turns back to thank Jesus. We know from his loud voice, his falling flat on his face at the Master’s feet, that even his body cannot contain his praise and thanksgiving.

It has been said that gratitude may be the purest measure of one’s character and spiritual condition. "Seek God, see God, choose life." The prayer continues to serve me well. It reminds me that I, too, see everything with strange, new sight. Like the tenth leper, I never want to lose sight of the miracle of God’s grace.

Being grateful I awaken to the gift of each day is the key.

The tenth leper’s faithful, untainted gratitude for God’s mercy is humbling to see. He realizes that life is a gift, that "just to get up each day is a windfall" (John Claypool). Life can make you feel as if you have lead in your shoes. It can leave you lost, wandering and wondering. But gratitude brings buoyancy. It is the antidote for fear. Gratitude flips despair on its back and says, "You’re not robbing me of today!"

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