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| February 19th 2012  Mark 1.40-45 | |

We are supporters of the Leprosy Mission in this church. Last year we raised something in the region of £800 for them. They do essential work in some of the poorest regions of the world helping to heal people from Leprosy.

(Story)

It’s interesting that some scholars don’t think that what is called leprosy in the bible was actually what we would term leprosy. They really didn't understand it. But, of course, 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 cannot appreciate the fear that accompanied skin diseases in the ancient world of Jesus. It brought about the same responses as the word Plague did in the 1200s, or Small Pox in the 1700s, or Aids or Bird Flu in the current era. It frightened them. They felt largely helpless against it, as indeed they were.  
  
What happens when fear takes over is people do not act, they react. And 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. 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.

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. Are you serious about your healing that you’ll do it?

This man is 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?

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. It is the mystery of suffering – if God is good why are people suffering – 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 change and decay create a world where one day our bodies will wear out, where death is an ever present feature – the way the world is.

There is also a mystery – as Job found out – if you have been reading Nicky gumbel’s Through the bible in a Year blog. Just recently he went through 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. Nicky Gumbel mentioned last week about God’s powerful hand and how in the new testament (eg 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. *Next week we will offer prayers for healing at the end of our service – it will be an opportunity for us to pray for each other – to be open to God’s touch 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, the traveller on the Jericho road, the centurion, 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."

Fourthly, by making him clean Jesus was restoring this man to community. We need a community around us. There is real concern about the changes to the National Health Service that are being proposed by the coalition government. Although it may maintain the principle of a health service free at the point of need, the proposals are criticised by some as encouraging further the privatisation of the health service and making profit more of a factor in offering care rather than service to the community. The fear is that will change our attitude to the health service and its approach to us.

Years ago, in the United States, which of course has a private health care system, the speaker of the house Sam Rayburn heard that he had terminal cancer, he shocked everyone when he announced that he was going back to his small town in Bonham, Texas. Everyone said to him: They have got the finest facilities in Washington, D. C., why go back to that little town. Rayburn said: "Because in Bohman, Texas, they know if you're sick and they care when you die." We need community. Despite all its faults, thank God for the church, in this individualised and virtual world – the church offers a real community that knows when you’re sick.

In his autobiography, Robert Brooke told of a trip he made from England to the United States, aboard the ship C. C. Cedric. When he arrived at the dock, he noticed that everyone had relatives standing there to send them off. In the midst of the embraces he felt terribly lonely. He thus called a young boy over and paid him a schilling to wave at him as the boat pulled out of the dock. And sure enough, the young boy stood there waving with all his might, and Brooke waved back. Everyone needs a community to love them and recognize them.

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.

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 of course 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 do all we can to restore each other to community – with each other and with God. 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 not stop giving praise to God who does wonderful things -the God who heals.