

Sermon 11 February 2018

Mark 1:40-45

In our gospel reading Jesus is confronted by a leper who asks to be healed. Jesus reaches out to the leper, he touches him and the leper is healed.

In Jesus's time leprosy was the most feared disease. It is interesting that when Jesus sent out the disciples to begin their ministry, he told them 'to heal the sick, raise the dead and cure those with leprosy.' (*Matthew 10:8*) You might also remember the story of how Francis of Assisi's life was transformed when he overcame his acute fear of lepers and embraced one.

Lepers were to be avoided. They often had to wear a bell around their neck to warn people they were coming so they could avoid them. They were placed in colonies, shunned by society. So apart from the quite severe physical trauma they suffered, there was also the emotional anguish and agony they endured from being treated as outcasts.

So just what is leprosy? It is an infectious disease that causes severe disfiguring skin sores and nerve damage. It is caused by a slow-growing type of bacteria called *Mycobacterium leprae*. This bacterium was discovered by a Norwegian Gerhard Hansen in 1873, and so the disease is often referred to as Hansen's disease. The disease, despite popular belief, is not that contagious, since it requires close contact with someone who has it, over a long period of time.

Today leprosy can be cured. However, in ancient times that wasn't the case, and in the Middle Ages leper colonies became widespread, particularly in Europe and India, and were often run by monastic orders.

So this leper approaches Jesus and asks to be healed. Now that in itself is most interesting. You must remember that lepers were outcasts, shunned by society, and they unquestionably knew their place. It was unthinkable that a leper would approach anyone, and yet here we have a leper going up to Jesus and speaking to him. It says so much about the appeal of Jesus – his warmth, his magnetism, the love for humanity that so obviously exudes from him and touches everyone and anyone who come into his presence. It is a non-judgmental and unconditional devotion for those who are rejected, ostracized, excluded. This simple act by this leper says as much about the personality of Jesus as any other story or account of Jesus that we come across in the New Testament.

Jesus breaks down barriers. And the message here for us is that when we break down barriers, we meet Jesus. Just as Francis of Assisi experienced Jesus when he embraced the leper, so do we experience Jesus when we reach out to and embrace those who have been dealt a harsh hand by society, or perhaps are just different to us.

Let me finish with a story. The pastor of a large inner-city church established a soup kitchen to help feed the many homeless people who hung around that part of the city. These folk flocked to the church day in and day out to get the help they needed to survive.

Over time, these homeless people began to wander into the 10.00am Sunday worship service. The congregation, who were upper-middle-class felt a little uncomfortable with such lower-class visitors. Eventually, one of the church wardens took the pastor aside and asked him, 'Do these people have to be here with us? Can't we provide a special service for them?'

The pastor answered, 'Well, I think everybody should have a chance to meet Jesus face to face.' 'Of course', replied the warden, 'everybody should have a chance to meet Jesus. I think they should have the same opportunities to meet Jesus face to face as we all do.'

The pastor shot back, 'I'm not talking about them. I am talking about you!'

I'm sure that gave the warden much to think about. The pastor had made it clear that what he really needed was to encounter Jesus in the homeless people who wandered into the church Sunday after

Sunday. Such encounters sanctify us.