

Sermon 11 February 2023

Romans 12:9-16 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' 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 recall 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. To say they were outcasts would be an understatement. 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 approached Jesus and asks to be cured. 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 obviously exudes from him and touches everyone and anyone who come into his presence. It is a non-judgmental and unconditional devotion for all, and in this case, for those who have been rejected, ostracised, excluded. This simple act by this leper says as much about the appeal and 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, we experience Jesus. Just as Francis of Assisi experienced Jesus when he embraced the leper, so do we experience something of Jesus when we reach out to and embrace those who have been dealt a harsh hand by life, or perhaps are just different to us. Let me share a story with you.

The pastor of an inner-city church established a soup kitchen to 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 service. The congregation, who were upper-middle class, felt a little uncomfortable with such lower-class visitors. Eventually, one of the wardens took the pastor aside and asked him, 'Do these people have to be here with us? Perhaps we could provide a special service for them?'

The pastor replied, 'Well, I think everybody should have the opportunity 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'm talking about you!'

I'm sure that gave the warden much to think about. The pastor made it quite clear that what he, the warden, and the congregation needed was to encounter Jesus in the homeless people who wandered into church each Sunday. Such encounters can sanctify us.

We are fortunate here in our church. The attitude of the warden and the congregation is not a factor here. However, we must not rest on our laurels, and in fact, we can always do better. It must always be our mission to improve the lot of the disadvantaged. Then, and only then, can we say that Jesus is alive in this church.

I remind you of that wonderful verse, Matthew 25:40, *'I assure you, when you did for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.'*

I want to finish by making this point. We can have the most wonderful worship here on a Sunday morning, but if that worship is not translated into the service of others Monday to Saturday, then it has not served its purpose. Worship and service must go hand in hand. The great Billy Graham said, *'The highest form of worship is the worship of unselfish service.'* And as I have stated before, Francis of Assisi believed that service to others was in itself a form of worship.

I believe that sustained growth of our church will come about through what we do for others, not what we do for ourselves. In other words, our worship should feed our service, which in turn will feed our growth. Please forgive me if you have heard me say this before (I need your forgiveness!). This is why the community centre, as part of our new church, is so very important. To say that raising the finance for our new build has been a challenge would be an understatement, and we ain't finished yet! We still have to raise close to another \$1.5 million!

But if we are to be relevant as a church; if we are to grow as a church; if we are to walk the talk as faithful and genuine disciples of Christ, then we need to do everything in our power to serve our community, and to be Christ's witnesses in our community.

In the end, we each have to take up that challenge ourselves. It is a collective challenge as a church, but it is also very much a personal challenge. As Mahatma Ghandi said, *'You must be the change you wish to see in the world.'* That's a personal challenge, if I've ever heard one!

And remember, not only do the people of our community stand to gain, but we personally gain as well. The last word goes to Albert Schweitzer, *"I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."*