**Jesus heals a leper**  12/3/23 dkm

Read: 2Kings 5:1-19, Mark 1:21-45

Text: Mark 1: 40-45

Psalms: 145:8-14, 51:1-9, 27:7-14, 134a

‘Cancer is a word not a sentence’. Have you heard this said, or maybe written on a signboard? But when we get a diagnosis of cancer we still fear it is a sentence, a death sentence, because we do not have a totally effective cure for cancer. I have seen a signboard with these very words written on it; it was along the road leading to the leprosy mission hospital, not far from where we lived in India. Yes, leprosy is still widespread in parts of India, and some other poor countries. In India, doctors would go out to the villages where I worked in search of lepers. Those with leprosy would be put on a medication program, and told to follow this program for a year or two. While not contagious, people living in close contact can contract the disease if they are susceptible.

Leprosy is a disease people fear, and not so long ago lepers were separated from family and put in leper colonies because of the terrible effects of this disease, and the fear of catching it. There is a suburb in Edinburgh called ‘Leperton’, which I am told was once a leper town. In Bible times lepers lived together outside the city wall, away from family and away from the house of God (Lev 13:46, 2Kings 7:3). Leprosy was different to other diseases. The person was unclean and untouchable.

What is called leprosy in the Bible is thought to refer to a number of skin diseases, but what we know as Hansen’s disease was probably the main one. Leprosy, or Hansen’s disease, is a skin disease caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*, a microbe that is actually similar to the one that causes tuberculosis or ‘consumption’. This leprosy-causing microbe attacks the nerves, causing hands to claw and other deformities. Among early symptoms are spots on the skin and lumpy sores which are not painful. Lack of any sensation is one of the terrible symptoms of this disease. Without the sense of touch or pain, leprosy sufferers can lose a finger or toe without feeling anything. Without a sense of pain they might walk on burning coals. In the leprosy hospital near to where we lived in India they made the patients wear shoes to protect their feet at all times.

Dr Paul Brand was a medical missionary who worked in India to find and cure lepers. People with leprosy were hidden away because of the stigma surrounding this disease, and hence the need to ‘find’ them. He found some people without fingers or toes because rats had chewed them off while the leper slept. In his book he highlights the blessing of having the sensation of pain. He writes, ‘I cannot think of a greater gift that I could give my leprosy patients than pain’. Let us be thankful for bodies that are sensitive to pain, and pray that our hearts might similarly be made more sensitive to sin.

When Jesus began his ministry at the age of about thirty, he went into a synagogue at Capernaum where he taught from the Bible and also delivered a demon-possessed man. He went on to heal Peter’s mother-in-law and many others around Galilee. One day he was approached by a leper asking to be cleansed. For this man to get close enough for Jesus to touch him was highly irregular. Matthew has Jesus healing this leper after coming down from the mountain (Mat 8:1-4), while Luke records this miracle in the same context as Mark (Luke 5:12-16).

**1. A leper comes to Jesus**

Jesus amazed the people from the very start with his words and his works. He showed his authority over evil spirts by casting them out. He showed his authority over sickness by healing a sick woman and then lots of others. As the crowd pressed upon him, Jesus escaped to other towns. It was in one of these towns that a leper managed to make his way through the crowd and get close to Jesus (Luke 5:12). He came and knelt before Jesus, imploring Jesus to cleanse him of his leprosy.

This leper believed Jesus had the power to heal or cleanse him. Jesus had already healed many people, as we have seen, but no lepers as yet. It was risky for a leper to be in town, let alone in a crowd. But this man came believing that Jesus could heal him. He did not say to Jesus, ‘If you can heal me, please do so’. The ‘if’ in his request concerned Jesus’ willingness to heal him, not doubt about his power to do so. This man knew he was a sinner, unworthy of any healing from this Man of God. He believed Jesus had the power to cleanse him, but would Jesus be willing to do this despite his sin?

Leprosy was seen as divine punishment. With Moses’ sister, Miriam, this was the case, but the Lord healed her (Num 12). King Uzziah was struck with leprosy by way of divine punishment (2Chron 26:20). However, there is no mention of this leper’s sin. Use of the term ‘cleansed’ rather than ‘healed’ points to this aspect of leprosy. The leper was regarded as ceremonially unclean. He was not allowed to enter the temple to worship God. If cured, he still needed to get a certificate from the priest.

Although in Bible times there was no cure, it is interesting that provision was made for those who were cured (Lev 14). Under OT law there were detailed provisions for the diagnosis of leprosy and related skin diseases. ‘When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling scab, or a bright spot’, he was brought to Aaron the priest (Lev 13:2). If the hair on the sore had turned white and the sore was deep it was regarded as leprosy. A person with ongoing symptoms was declared ‘unclean’ and made to live outside the camp. They had to tear their clothes like a person in mourning, and cry out, ‘Unclean, Unclean!’ wherever they went (Lev 13:45,46).

**2. A leper is touched by Jesus**

The leper acknowledged the power of Jesus to cleanse him but was not sure that Jesus would be willing to do so. He probably believed Jesus needed to touch him, yet no one touched a leper, apart from other lepers. He knew he did not deserve to be healed. He was pleading for mercy. The Lord told Moses he was a merciful and gracious God (Exod 34:6), and the psalms remind us of the grace and mercy of God (Ps 103:8). The leper may have thought to himself, ‘If Jesus is the Son of God then he might be merciful and gracious also’. And sure enough, this is what he discovered. Mark, and only Mark, tells us that Jesus was ‘moved with compassion’ (1:41). Not only was Jesus powerful to cleanse this leper, he was full of grace and willing to cleanse him.

With the leper kneeling before him, Jesus put out his hand and touched him saying, ‘I am willing; be cleansed’ (1:41). ‘And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed’ (1:42). His healing was immediate and complete. It was not just a foot or a hand that was healed, it was his whole body. There was no, ‘come back tomorrow or next week for another try or for further treatment’. The body that was covered with horrible patches and sores became like the skin of a little child. He was whole again. He might have remembered how Naaman the Syrian was cleansed of leprosy by the prophet Elisha.

There was no happier man that day than this leper made clean by Jesus, by his touch and his word. No man was willing to touch this leper for fear of contamination, and being made unclean. But Jesus had no such fear. He was willing to touch the leper because he had the power to cure both his leprosy and his sin. In the following chapter Jesus teaches the truth that, ‘the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins’ (2:10). In the eyes of this leper, and people in the crowd, Jesus was already demonstrating this truth.

**3. A leper is told to tell no one**

The man, no doubt, wanted to jump for joy and tell everyone what Jesus had done for him. It seems that this is what he did, even though Jesus told him not to (1:45). Jesus told him to go and show himself to the priest and make the prescribed offering for his cleansing (1:44). He was to do this as a testimony or proof to them, to the priests. Why did Jesus instruct the man to go to the priest? He does not say, but we make two suggestions.

Firstly, because it was required by the law. The Mosaic Law was still in operation. Jesus told him to do what Moses commanded for lepers who were cleansed (Lev 14). If this man wanted to come back into town to live with his family and join others in worship, he needed to be certified as ‘clean’ by the priest. ‘The priest shall make atonement for him and he shall be clean’ (Lev 14: 20). He knew, and everyone in the crowd knew, that it was Jesus who made him clean. If this news reached the ears of the priests, who were becoming hostile towards Jesus, they might not declare him clean. He should go straightaway and get the priests to certify him clean.

Secondly, Jesus was probably trying to avoid ‘a popular enthusiasm that would try to make Jesus into the Messianic conqueror nationalists were looking for’. Across the lake in Gentile territory, Jesus would tell the man from whom he cast out many demons to go and tell what great things God had done for him (5:19). But among the Jews he was careful not only to keep the law, but to keep people from getting the wrong idea about him. Jesus had come to save souls, not just heal bodies.

Many saw Jesus as a miracle worker, a healer and helper for them in their life in this world. When he taught about the kingdom of God, and about giving his blood as a sacrifice for sin, they were offended and went back (John 6:66). Still today, some see Jesus in this way. All they think about is Jesus healing the sick, or helping them with some material need.

Jesus can do all things. Nothing is impossible for God (Luke 1:37). Is this what you believe? The leper believed Jesus could cure him from leprosy - or as he said, make him clean. He had the faith to be healed. But he also needed the Lord to have mercy on him. He did not demand to be healed because, ‘No one should be sick’, as we sometimes hear said. He did not claim he had sufficient faith to be healed. He prayed, ‘If you, Jesus, will it to be so’. Jesus himself prayed to his Father saying, ‘Your will be done’.

To be clean can also mean spiritual cleansing or cleansing from sin. More than anything else we need this cleansing. Do you know that your sin keeps you outside the kingdom of God, and outside of heaven? Do you believe that Jesus can not only heal your body, but cleanse your heart from sin, and bring you into his kingdom? This is the real power and authority that Jesus has- power over sin and death. Have you asked the Lord to cleanse your heart from sin and make it white as snow?

**4. A leper tells everyone**

Despite the strict warning given by Jesus as he sent this man off to the priest, the man did not keep quiet. He went out and started telling everyone of how Jesus cleansed him of his leprosy. This resulted in more and more people flocking to Jesus, so that he could no longer enter a town openly (1:45). He had to stay in desolate places, but still they came to him from every direction. He kept on preaching and healing the sick. What great compassion Jesus had for these people! What great patience he had with them! What great power he demonstrated before them! Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8). Do you know the power of this same Jesus? Do you know him as your Saviour and Lord?

What do you think was the end of this healed leper? On a later occasion Jesus healed ten lepers but only one returned to thank Jesus and give glory to God. Only to this one cleansed leper did Jesus say, ‘Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well’ (Luke 17:15-19), meaning the man was saved. The leper here in Mark 1 had faith in Jesus’ power to heal him, and his prayer was with humility, but he failed to obey Jesus when told not to tell anyone. Those whom Jesus saves are obliged to obey him. Is this true of you? Besides, there is no mention of him following Jesus after being healed. We presume he went to the priest to get a certificate of cleansing, but did he become a disciple of Jesus Christ? ‘Trust and obey for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey’.