

The Ten Lepers (Luke 17:11-19)

10:00am Holy Communion – 12th October 2025

Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

<prayer>

Sometimes great inventions can literally change the world, but can bring unintended side effects.

- ❖ Nuclear weapons, the internet, Cherry coke.
- ❖ Penicillin - Sir Alexander Fleming – growing bacteria.

Jesus, being the caring and compassionate soul that he was, worked for much of his time on the edges of society. Along the ragged borders of humanity Jesus found the lost and lonely, **or better for this morning's gospel – the unclean – the lepers**. In a religious system that made a clear prescription between who was considered clean or unclean, to be leper was to be separated from everything and everyone. Only one thing could be worse, and that is if you were a Samaritan at the same time.

Yet leprosy had a strange and beneficial side-effect, which is that it brought unity amongst those afflicted, and this is where Jesus often found those of the greatest faith, perhaps where he last expected to find it. Whether Jews, Samaritans or Gentiles, no one was free from the potential of contracting the horrible disease. Because of their outcast status, those afflicted had to form remote colonies away from everybody else. Perhaps in these colonies there was a mutual cooperation in suffering that was more important to address than mere religious differences. **In their hard lives these poor souls really needed each other.** It's possible to read from this story in Luke that the ten lepers who approached Jesus consisted of nine Jews and one Samaritan. **Yet regardless of their differences they came to him together.**

I'm not sure how many Samaritans lived in the Holy Lands of Israel during Jesus's time, but they were a significant minority – and (I'm sad to say) a despised one at that. The Samaritans were considered heretics, half-blood Jews who held to a different understanding of God. They didn't follow the same laws as the Jews, they didn't worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, and they had their own set of priests.

But we know that at various points Jesus reaches out to the Samaritans with care and acceptance, as a demonstration of God's total love for all people. We can all remember the story of the good Samaritan who cared for the Jew attacked by robbers, and you may also remember the story of the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at the well, talking and drinking with her.

The reason for these various Samaritan stories is for the gospel writers to **tell of the Jesus who undercut the cultural divisions of society in order to tell of God his father, who will judge with equal regard and will bless with equal regard.** This is also true of Jesus's encounters with women, gentiles, tax collectors and the rest. Luke the gospel writer was himself a gentile and always interested in the human condition, so he is especially concerned to tell such stories.

‘On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’

Here amongst the ten lepers, there are no distinctions. They all come to approach Jesus equally and call out for mercy – ‘**Master, have mercy on us**’.

We tend to think of unity amongst people as a good thing - indeed it is. There is far too much division to be had around us, and in these times of mass media, our differences are continuously reinforced, because that makes for news, and news is a product. I’m afraid it’s true in the Anglican church too.

Luke gives us the detail that they ‘*kept their distance*’, as was necessary because of their affliction, both physically and in their status as being religiously unclean. Nevertheless, Jesus can still work with them and so he gives the instruction for them to: ‘**Go and show yourselves to the priests**’.

But there is a contradiction here. They can’t go to the priests, for all the reasons that they find themselves separated in the first place – they are contaminated, infected, unclean, legally apart. Isn’t there a step missing here in Luke’s account? Where is the action of Jesus in a healing moment, like most of the other miracles? **Jesus doesn’t actually seem to do anything.** To be sure, Jesus is not saying ‘*oh those priests can heal you – so don’t bother me. Go to them instead.*’ Everyone knew that was impossible for lepers. **The only point of visiting the priests would be to give an offering of thanksgiving, as the law required.** Indeed, that is all Jesus was asking them to do. They might have said to him: ‘*will you not heal us before we go?*’, but strangely they don’t ask him that.

We are not told how the lepers worked out what Jesus was intending here, but they seem obedient and only too pleased to have some direction. **Maybe there is a point of faith here.** I have known people to be healed, but I can't fathom it or work out the process either. **Please let me know if you can heal people, I'd like to know how!**

So off they skip, all ten of them, expecting a good result, and which happily Luke confirms 'as they went, they were made clean'. It sounds as if the journey was the most important part of it all, **which is often true when trying to face the most difficult situations of life.** We tend to like rapid solutions, but healing is not often a fixative available to address all things quickly and instantly. Healing may be deep and prolonged, and well beyond the symptoms - more like trying to heal a life more than an illness.

Now you may have worked out that there is a slight problem here, which is that the one Samaritan amongst the ten can't go to the priests with the other nine because he was different – he was a Samaritan. **The story reads as if that one person might have given up on their journey with the others or not even attempt it at all.** I expect this Samaritan was worried that he couldn't carry out the instruction and therefore may not receive the healing. But he does go, and he is healed, if anything from an even more separate place. **I bet those priests didn't accept his thanks offering though.** So, he feels he has not completed the command of Jesus and therefore must return to him, to somehow fully realise his healing for life.

I've warned you before of the utility God who is the one who meets our needs, provides our solutions, removes our problems. With that sort of healing utility, at some point we wouldn't need to go back to that God anymore.

The Samaritan could not have known, but he in fact had gone to give thanks to the most eligible priest of all – another unintended consequence. Jesus seems very pleased that he did so and at the same time has a bit of a gripe that none of the others did the same. The bonus for the Samaritan is when Jesus tells him **‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’** **None of the other nine would have received such a blessing from the Son of God.**

But here is yet another unintended consequence. Those desperate faith-seeking lepers probably never went back to the colony. They would have dispersed back into the tepid majority of those who lead apparently normal lives. **Would they ever have to call upon God with such faith again?** Would they ever again find such human unity across the divides? Nine of them seemed to just melt away.

So we seek God here today to confess and receive forgiveness – all good – we too are a colony of sinful imperfection. We come and seek the priest, literally, in hope and thanksgiving to be cleansed – **and then off we go.** But let us not use our righteous Christian status as a way to then separate ourselves away from each other, and the rest of the mob of sinful unwashed humanity. **Worse still, let us not separate ourselves from Christ Jesus, who has now met our needs.**

Our unity remains so important because unless we return to Jesus and remain with him, even when all is well, our lives will not be healed. Keep coming back to Jesus, keep coming back to church, keep coming back to one another. **If we do so that God will work further through us.**

So let us maintain the colony. Thanks be to God.

Amen.