

SERMON: Sunday – 9 October 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Crossing Borders and the Attitude of Gratitude

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

The lepers in the story appealed to Jesus for pity. Have pity on us, they asked.

It was commonplace at the time to think that leprosy was a punishment for sin.

In some ways, that thinking hasn't changed in some people's minds. Some still think that disease is a result of wrongdoing rather than a result of poverty or inequality.

Leprosy is mostly eradicated as a disease today yet there are some poor places in the world where the disease still exists. And that's not because of sin.

TLM is the global Christian organisation leading the fight against leprosy, says that "Every two minutes, someone is diagnosed with leprosy. That's more than 200,000 new cases a year. Although it is curable, millions of people worldwide are living with the effects of the disease, from physical disability to mental health problems, poverty and discrimination".

Following Jesus Christ, they seek to bring about transformation; breaking the chains of leprosy and empowering people to attain healing, dignity and life in all its fullness. Everything they do is focused on the goals of zero leprosy transmission, zero leprosy disability and zero leprosy discrimination.

The fact that leprosy still disables people is a result of global inequality and we give thanks for TLM and pray for success in all they do. And, of course, we can support them in prayer and in others ways.

I find it interesting that Jesus gives the 10 lepers something to do. When they come begging for mercy Jesus gives them a task which they can easily do but which gives them a sense of dignity in that they can play a part in their own healing.

'Go, show yourselves to the priests.'

Go. It's a simple command. But it would have taken faith to respond to it. As it does even today. When Jesus says 'go', do we respond and play our part? What is it Jesus is saying 'go' to you for today?

In sending them to the priest, Jesus is upholding the Law, something he clearly said he had come to do. The Law which enabled healing to take place. Was it the simple act of obedience that helped fulfil the healing?

And as they went, they were cleansed.

Notice all ten were healed. Their cleansing was dependent on their coming back to say 'thank you Lord'.

But in one case we see that a foreigner did exactly that.

When he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him – and he was a Samaritan.

We know how the Jews felt towards Samaritans. There was no love between them. Yet Jesus, on his way to Jerusalem, travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. In other words he intentionally goes to that place where tension was probably greatest, and where hatred was most felt.

Here is Jesus, on the border, the missional Jesus, going to foreign places with good news. Here is Jesus, with the gift of healing as a tool for mission. Healing gets people's attention and, in some cases, maybe only one in ten, faith emerges on the other side.

'Rise and go; your faith has made you well'.

Rise, actually the Greek word, *anastas*, means stand up, as in hold your head up, be made well and go on walking tall.

A simple expression of thanks to Jesus, is commended by Jesus, as an expression of faith by an outsider.

Your faith has made you well - in the perfect tense, which means your faith is making you well. Go on and keep going on in faith and your faith will keep on making you well. It's an ongoing process. A daily walk.

Someone has pointed out that as this account takes place in the borderlands there is more than just a geographical border. There is a second border, that between lepers, living on the outskirts and those living in the village itself.

And when they see Jesus, they stand "at a distance" as if there was a border control there too.

The theologian, Ken Baker, said, “of course, there was no border control between Samaria and Galilee. But there was a conceptual boundary between those who were within the covenant of Israel and those who were not. And there was no security fencing between the lepers and the village, but there was a rigorous requirement that they keep away, to avoid contamination. And this consideration may have also informed the distance between the lepers and Jesus. The point is, the sense of separation is underlined three times before anything happened! They are excluded from covenant, from community and from Christ”.

Which reminds us of Paul’s words to the Ephesians.

“Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.” (2:12).

And then, at the feet of Jesus, the outsider finds equality with the disciples. Jesus welcomes the outsider with border smashing grace and mercy, as it does elsewhere in the Gospels, with the woman at the well and the Syro-Phoenician woman too. Barriers come down and distances are abolished. Borders disappear, borders of race, gender, class.

“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;
to his feet thy tribute bring;
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
evermore his praises sing.

It was said of St Francis of Assisi that after meditating on the poor and humble Jesus he got to a point where he knew what to do with the rest of his life: to embrace Jesus in the poor and rejected, in those who previously had repulsed him.

He was filled with joy and said, “This is what I want; this is what I desire with all my heart.” He renounced his patrimony, gave away all his possessions, and began the life of an itinerant preacher who dwelled among the lepers. Others followed, and the Franciscan way of life began (Murray Bodo, *St. Francis of Assisi: The Practical Mystic*).

And listen too, to Paul’s words to Timothy.

if we are faithless,
he remains faithful

So is there hope for the nine who never came back with thanksgiving? Yes there is.

if we are faithless,
he remains faithful

He doesn't give up on outsiders but meets us again with grace, undeserved favour. However, it's better for us, to try to get to a place of thanksgiving with God. It's good to cultivate a habit of being thankful together even for the smallest of thing. Because when we can do that, then we can be thankful for everything.

And that way of being, that attitude, is infectious and good company to be around. It helps to heal atmospheres as well as diseases.

Let's look for excuses to be thankful today.

The writers of *Spill The Beans* said about this passage:

“As always when we consider this passage, we must take on board a central theme which is that within the sphere of God's love, barriers are always broken down. Where these lepers were living was a 'mixed zone' between Samaria and Galilee. Typically, people of different races and nationalities kept themselves apart. But here, their shared identity as those suffering from the same condition overrides the other demographics that so often means barriers are erected and people are separated.

Often those on the margins of society, in having this in common, stick together beyond the traditional differentiations that are otherwise dominant culturally.

There is a sense that sometimes in certain circumstances in life, we are more aware of our shared humanity than at other times. The pandemic, many said, revealed a side of humanity that is sometimes forgotten. In some places, and in some areas of life, we came together to be more supportive of each other. Often it is in adversity that we recognise the bond between us more clearly. Perhaps something like this happened in this leper community.”

Let me finish still with question, were the barriers broken down for these 10 lepers? The answer. Probably. The outcasts were probably able to return to live with the others, with the families they'd been forced apart from or excluded by. And for at least one, there were others barriers that came down, the one, perceived or otherwise, of the barrier between a seemingly distant God and a sinful human. That barrier is gone in Christ. For God has come near. And we are eternally grateful.

May we pray.

O Lord, if we're seeing or feeling a barrier or border between you and your people, may your love demolish every obstacle right now. In you, may we be ever thankful. In Jesus name. Amen.