

Year C, Proper 28

Faith that brings wholeness

*(A reflection on Luke 17 v11-19: Oct 9th)*

I don't know about you, but something seemed odd to me about that gospel. It took me a while to work out that it seemed to be a mixture of fact and fiction: on the one hand an incident in the itinerant life of Jesus; on the other a parable carrying hidden messages. According to the William Herzog, an American Professor of New Testament Interpretation in Rochester, New York state, in 'Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to The Historical Jesus', which was published in 2005, it was just that: a healing incident in the life of Jesus, written up in parable-like language by Luke to impress Jewish and gentile readers. If William is right, we are dealing with a fine example of the care needed in reading and interpreting this and most passages from the gospels. If it seems unsettling that words from the bible cannot be taken as read and as truth, think on this - as a blend of fact and allegory, they contain meaning far beyond the bare words: taken literally, passages like today's gospel can diminish our image of Jesus whereas, freely interpreted, they can present a timeless message with great relevance today. Before we explore our gospel in more detail, we need to recognize that Luke, like the other gospel writers, is gathering together anecdotes about Jesus that were circulating on the Galilean grapevine; each evangelist selects his own bunch of stories and puts them into a narrative. Matthew, Mark and Luke all refer to incidents of individual lepers being healed by the touch of Jesus but only Luke has this story of a group being healed.

Now for some context, which Luke doesn't bother with in his haste to make moral and theological points.

Every time Jesus and his itinerant band of disciples approached a new community, be it village, town or city, the first people they would meet would be those rejected by each community: amongst the outcasts would be those with conspicuous diseases of the skin, including the highly infectious and much-feared leprosy. Unable to make a differential diagnosis, a 'worst case scenario' was assumed: a visibly diseased person was assumed to be a threat to others and excluded as unclean until temple priests declared otherwise. On the outskirts of a community, Jesus and his friends shared the vulnerability of

the outcast; they were also strangers and didn't know if their entry would be welcome. The outcasts on the other hand would see any visitors as messengers who could put in a good word on their behalf with those holding the levers of power. Jesus' compassion for outcast fraternities therefore sprung from empathy and brought hope not just of healing but acceptance by the community and a return to normal life. Jesus did not heal to draw attention to or prove himself: his business was to heal broken communities. He is unlikely to have discriminated and picked out individuals: he is more likely to have helped clusters of outcasts, a bit like a mobile CAB counsellor. He would not have run checks on synagogue attendance before deciding who to heal and who to ignore.

This is broadly the scenario behind the oral tradition that Luke puts into his own words in our gospel and his handiwork shows in his numeracy. He says ten lepers were healed. Ten was no ordinary number: it was a 'lucky number' for the faithful Jew: they received 10 commandments from Moses; they set aside a Passover lamb on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month and sacrificed it on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month, the Festival of Yom Kippur). That day marked the one recorded in Exodus, when God was believed to have spared households of the faithful in Egypt. In specifying '10 lepers', Luke shows his hand as he tries to grab the attention of Jewish readers and converts. The '10 lepers' are a 'heads up' detail, added to the original incident.

But Luke also has a wider, gentile audience in mind and he probably gives *them* a 'heads up' by adding another layer to the story, turning the incident into a parable. Only one of the 10 returned to thank Jesus for advice that turned all their lives around and that man was a Samaritan, a religious outcast to the Jew. Luke then has Jesus adding insult to the injured Jew by saying to the Samaritan

'Go your way, your faith has made you whole'

Whether the healed Samaritan knew and observed the 10 commandments or did the right thing on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the right month did not matter one iota. If Luke is adding in a bit of anti-temple rhetoric here, it's not as though he was saying something Jesus did not say, indeed had said and enacted far more forcefully.

The healed Samaritan had faith with three qualities that brought wholeness

*1. Trust*

He listened to what Jesus had to say and did exactly what Jesus had told him to do, respecting his authority.

He did not allow his ethnicity to prevent him speaking with a common voice amongst Jews. That a rag-tag bunch of city outcasts should call Jesus 'master' in unison could well be another Luke embellishment but it probably expresses reality: Jesus' accepted all as equals, regardless of ethnicity and bodily health and his concern for and empathy with outcasts, who most had written off, would have won their immediate respect.

*2. Courage*

All 10 had taken bold action in following Jesus' advice but a Samaritan would have had to breakthrough a religious barrier; he was an outcast - coming from neighbouring but hated Samaria. He would have had to swallow pride and presumptions in presenting himself before Jewish priests, having bathed in the Chamber of Lepers, part of the large, open temple court in Jerusalem. To be fair to the priesthood, they did practice what was ordained: an officiant had to have perfect skin himself; a young priest with acne would not be allowed to proclaim a leper to be clean and may well have been left to mop up after everyone had left. However, to be motivated to break the downward spiral of despair, to march into the temple precincts and face the possibility of rejection again would have required great fortitude by that 'foreigner'.

*3. Gratitude*

The rest of the healed men were so excited by their re-acceptance into city life that they forgot who had made it possible: they may have even fawned over the priests and temple shenanigans that deemed them acceptable.

The Samaritan outsider, the foreigner, the last to be expected to recognize the author of their salvation, praises God and thanks Jesus, the sources of his restored fortunes. He knows nothing about later claims that Jesus was God's Son or that Jesus' death on a cross represented a once only act of God to save humankind from its inherent sinfulness. These were layers

added to 'faith' by the early church in much the same way as Luke had embellished an original healing incident.

Luke's story is redolent with meaning for today. We live in a society that can deprive someone with autism of his freedom for 28 years, even denying him the luxury of companionship with fellow sufferers: where refugees are threatened with deportation to a distant land: where we struggle to find safe places for those healed in our hospitals, to find safe refuge in our communities. We worship God and Jesus surrounded by what might be described as a company of the 'worried well', respectable and without blemish. We say things in accordance with canonical edicts that, secretly, we may not wholly believe in. We sing hymns that portray God and Jesus as sitting aloof and disconnected from swathes of suffering and neglect.

To change all of these things requires the qualities shown by the healed leper:

- ✝ trust in the path followed by Jesus,
- ✝ courage to follow a path that takes us amongst the outcasts of society, and
- ✝ gratitude that he stayed the course and can still transform lives.

Together, these and these alone complete a faith that can make us whole.

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