

Jesus Cleanses a Leper

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Epiphany + 6 – Mk 1 40-45

And then along comes a leper! Early in Mark's gospel, just about every verse begins with *kai* (*and* or *and then*). Events in Jesus' life seem to cascade in on him at this very early stage in his ministry. Not just little things, though. ***And then*** along comes a leper!

What do we know about the illnesses the New Testament calls leprosy? The word *lepein* that it comes from means *scale* or *peel off*. It describes a variety of disfiguring diseases, not just leprosy (mouldy, salt-damp infected walls too!). The Law of Moses said anyone with a disease like this must cry out '*unclean*' wherever they went so that no-one would come near them and be contaminated ^{Lev 13.45}. Jews believed that anyone touching a leper may as well have touched a corpse. To do so would shut you out of social and religious life for at least a week. But someone who actually had this sort of disease was numbered among the living dead; an untouchable. ^{Luz}

II 5

So this man who came to Jesus was an outcast of the most severe order. Rabbinic writings after Jesus' time show that scholars believed leprosy was as hard to cure as raising someone from the dead. It was really a life sentence. This man was perpetually unclean, and that meant a life forever apart from everyone else. On top of that, many people saw leprosy as divine punishment for some serious sin the sufferer must have committed. So he couldn't expect to be treated with compassion either – people would think *You've only got yourself to blame!* He lived in the wilderness in many ways. That's where he came from, and he came to Jesus.

He must have been desperate. The loneliness and desolation must have been gnawing at him from the inside like the disease gnawed at his body to make him so reckless as to approach someone.

And he says to Jesus; if you choose, you can make me clean. It's as if he is talking to God; only God can heal at will. But actually, he doesn't ask to be healed. He asks to be made clean; by which he means to be restored to society.

Of course, that meant healing, but the important thing for this man was being clean; to have the chance to be with *people* again! It meant so much to him – he wanted it so urgently – that when he was healed, he couldn't wait long enough to see the priest before he talked with people. What use is a priest anyway? They could only *declare* people clean. Jesus can *make* us clean. Suddenly he was whole! He had to tell everyone this.

But let's go back to the way Jesus treated him. It says he was *moved with pity*. In many Bibles, you'll see a little footnote mark next to the word *pity*. And the footnote will read, *Other ancient authorities read anger*'.

Several commentators opt for the more difficult reading '*anger*'. One of them said; you can understand a scribe who's making a copy of the gospel changing *anger* to *pity*. But what scribe would change it the other way? Bruce Metzger says it may even have first been mistranslated into Greek from Jesus' heart language, Aramaic. In Aramaic's modern version, Syriac, *ethraham* means *he had pity* and *ethra'em* means *he was enraged*). What do you think about this story if the word *is anger*?

There are certainly angry sounding words later on in the story, *After sternly warning him, Jesus sent him away at once.*^{v.43}

What could have got into Jesus? (Story of the single Mum left to raise four children. Now adults at her birthday, the heart of their speeches was the statement that 'Mum taught us never to walk past an injustice.') The cost of getting involved – the danger, the pushback – these days, the trolling and character assassination. The injustice back then was the custom in that society that people with skin-diseases lived without human touch. Jesus would have been aware what it meant for him to respond to this man's request and it may well have angered him – yet he reached out and touched him.

There are many things to discuss about this passage if we're to get to the bottom of it, but in the end, we have to ask what is gospel – what is *Good News* – about it? For me, the good news is how this story says *who* Jesus is. Let me explain.

The Gospel of Mark has a thing in it that scholars call the messianic secret. Read the gospel, and count how many times Jesus heals someone and then tells them or the demons to keep quiet about it; not to tell anyone he's the Messiah. Mark didn't want readers to focus on Jesus as a miracle worker. For Mark, no-one could ever appreciate what it means that Jesus is the Messiah without knowing him as the crucified one. And Mark proclaims Jesus as just that in his good news of Jesus.

The leper comes to Jesus out of the wilderness – out of exile, if you like. He's untouchable; cut off from going where he wants to go, unable to touch anyone, and a danger to anyone who might touch him. Jesus rejects this man's isolation. He does it by publicly touching the untouchable. And the man is set free, immediately. Suddenly made whole, he bounds off to bathe in his restored contact with people. Verse 45 says that he goes off proclaiming freely and spreading the word.

He does what Jesus wanted to keep doing. But v. 45 goes on to say that Jesus can't do this any more. Now he's the one who can't go openly into a town – who has to stay out in the wilderness. This is the Jesus we know from the Cross. That

leper in the wilderness had been on something like a cross – cursed and condemned. And by touching him and restoring him, Jesus changed places with him. This is the meaning of the Cross. Look at the crucifix – Jesus is there in our place. It's a source of joy and freedom to the outcast and broken, because Jesus wills our wholeness – and he gives himself to make it happen.

This is the Gospel. Jesus the Messiah becomes one of us and sets us free to be ourselves – whole and connected. And the new freedom – the new life is a taste of the resurrection life he calls us to share with him. You and I must continue to proclaim and live this, and bring people to him from any and every wilderness. Amen.