

The Story of the Ten Lepers

A Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity 2014

Collect

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command; through Jesus Christ our Lord *Amen*.

The Epistle is written in the Fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians beginning at the 16th verse.

Galatians 5: 16-24

¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

¹⁷ For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.

¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness,

²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions,

²¹ envy,* drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires

Here ended the Epistle

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as written in the 11th Chapter of St Luke beginning at the 23rd verse ...

Glory to you O Lord

Luke 17: 11-19

¹¹ On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.

¹² As he entered a village, ten leper approached him. Keeping their distance,

¹³ they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!'

¹⁴ When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean.

¹⁵ Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

¹⁶ He prostrated himself at Jesus' ^{*}feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?

¹⁸ Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'

¹⁹Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

This is the gospel of our Lord

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, open your Word to our hearts and our hearts to your Word.
Amen

Illustration:

It's a tough call but if I were asked to make a short-list
of the parables or Jesus encounters
that's made a lasting impression on my Christian formation;

then today's gospel lesson has to be among the top bill

Once I'd sussed a leper isn't some animal with spots on

and when I'd got over the predictable [*morbid*] school boy
fascination
of detached digits

I came to realise that this story as told by *Matthew and Luke*
just about says everything there is to say about;

*.... the compassion and love
that lies at the heart of who God is*

.... [that] compassion and love are embodied in God

***.... [that] God reached out in the darkness of a sinful and broken
word in the incarnation
and came down in Christ to the lowest part of our need***

Amazingly for me;

***.... all that [and more] from this one seemingly obscure
encounter by the roadside***

Shift;

And I've thought a lot about that *[this week]*

and I've thought about it knowing that *[once again]*
it's that time of year
when we say welcome to our friends from WERs ...

So *[I ask myself];*

how might the plight of a group of lepers *[all those years ago]*
connect with our own compassion and hospitality today

I've thought about that
and I've thought about something else about this passage;

Move;

From being a child

the leper story has been something of a pivotal point in my
understanding that for God's people;

.... the suffering of all people in distant lands
is connected with my life.

I cannot walk by on the other side of the world;

.... because the God to whom I pray about my niggles
is at the same time
present to the great sufferings
of his children across the whole of creation.

When I'm jogging his arm;

he is grieving over the cry of a mother
carrying two of her children to the refugee camp,
one just alive and one already dead.

When I'm tut-tutting about some inconsequential nothingness *[like
when I swallowed my temporary crown this week*

when I am tut-tutting;

he is grieving with someone
who is lying in the back of beyond
in a pool of his own body fluids
as he finally succumbs to the horrors of Ebola

Being God,
that's how he lives, and he can cope with it,
and he doesn't love me any the less because
I am rich and my concerns are trivial,

but *[but then]*
he does expect me to see who else is jogging his arm,
and to know that in Him we are brothers and sisters,

Shift;

As I said;
the WERs visit has been on my mind this week.

In recent years
our friend Peter Else has taken an active part in this annual event
and sadly *[now he's moved on from Snuff Mill]*
he's going to be sorely missed this afternoon.

Peter's gift was to talk to our visitors about the history of this place

And so I'm tempted to do just that with you *[right here and now]*

So this is how it was:

At some time in the past *[incidentally the kids love this story]*
[at some time in the past]
one *[or more]* of my predecessors –
accompanied by his churchwarden
would have taken up his place at **this** chancel step

Then with stole and crucifix in hand
the priest proceeds to say this prayer;

*"We commend into thy hands of mercy [most merciful Father]
the soul of this our brother departed"*

The words [of course] will be familiar to [this congregation /some]
because they actually come from the BCP order
for the ***"Burial of the Dead"***

which may [or may **NOT**] seem all that remarkable except

[except] the priest is saying this
NOT at the meeting of the corpse
but to the person who kneels [at the chancel step];

.... a living breathing person
and surreal as it may seem

***someone had just attended their
very own funeral service!!***

And that poor someone

was then led from here by the churchwarden
to a place of exile beyond the village boundary
[in fact to the hospital on the hill] [or Spital Hill as we know it
today]

and the nearest they ever got to this place again
was through six feet of masonry

-7-

*Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity Mitford 8.30 BCP & 10.30 Family Communion
21/9/2014*

[in the corner of the Mitford chapel]

Fortunately *[in 1798]* leprosy was eradicated in this country
but before that this was the way for anyone who was diagnosed with
this disease

for all human purposes they were departed from this world

.... *absolute and total social exclusion!*

No other disease be it
bubonic plague
yellow fever
malaria
diphtheria
scarlet fever
or AIDs

.... no disease *[not even the scourge of Ebola]*
has so separated one human being from another!

Shift;

Now let's imagine stepping even back further in time:

¹*When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds
followed him;*

We join that crowd now
on the old border road between Samaria and Galilee

It's a hot day

the kind of day when the dust of the road lies thick on the bushes
and puffs up around your feet with every step you take.

the kind of day when the sweat runs down into your eyes
and turns the grime on your face into streaks of mud.

For a while - the only sound that any of us hear
is the low drone and buzz of the insects as we walk
but then through the still of that day,
at first in the distance,
then closer and closer - we hear them;

"Unclean – unclean - unclean".

We look around, and finally,
as we round the crest of a hill to begin the long walk down to the
village
we see them –
standing just off the road

and as we draw closer
their cries fall still

"Unclean – unclean - then silence

.... There's a group of them
and even if we hadn't heard their cry there'd be
no problem knowing who *[and what]* they were.

Some of them have rags wrapped around their hands,
others have their feet bundled up in strips of old cloth,
all of them were dressed in the tattered and torn clothing
and long unkempt hair –

*[that's become something like a recognised uniform for
lepers.]*

No – there's no mistaking -
standing there
staring at us like hungry and wounded animals
and the sight of those wretched creatures
just stops us all - in our tracks.

And even if we'd approached in the dark
the vile stench would have warned us off;

No one wants to get any closer now
[I mean]
everyone knows about leprosy don't they?
It's simply awful.

No one can recover from it,
it slowly rots and destroys the body,
and worse still
.... it's so easy to catch.

That's why the priests have to get involved
it's the law *[you see]*
anyone who has a dodgy skin blemish

-10-

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has to report to for an examination

It's hard to visualize a more desperate /frantic situation

You just can't imagine how many times they'd been here before
.... how many times they'd watched the travellers come down the
hill

.... and then seen them hurry past

and all the while they'd been
hoping against hope
that this passing doctor
or that rabbi
or some teacher would actually speak to them
and do something-or-other

that they'd come up with something
.... so long as it relieved their suffering;

But everything about them;

.... the look in their eyes
.... their demeanour
.... their voice;

everything speaks of being
nothing short of a living - friendless corpse

.... desolation

.... desperation

So we try to second-guess the conversation going on between the ten;

“You bet” one of them whispers to his mates

*“[You bet] he’s going to be like all the rest
he’ll just twist his face
or shake his head
or nod
and keep on going*

*.... now I wonder [I wonder]
is this one going to be a twister or a shaker ?*

And he almost blurts it out;

*“go on then - you choose
oh and while you’re about it –
you could make me clean”*

‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’

*‘....Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.’ [as Matthew 8
put’s it]*

But we know of course that this time it was different

Jesus was no “*twister or a shaker*”

.... nor was it his way to ignore or pass anyone by

And so Jesus stops [*and as Matthew's version tells us*]

*"in defiance of all common sense
and to the lepers utter astonishment
he moves closer*

*.... and he reaches out his hand
.... and touches"*

³*He stretched out his hand and touched [saying]*

"I do choose"

Luke put's it like this;

¹⁴*When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean.*

.... the touch of Jesus
[the touch of Jesus]
the touch that sets
all cultural fear
and horror
and revulsion on its head

is the first human contact they'd had in *God knows
how long*

³*He stretched out his hand and touched saying, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately [the] leprosy was cleansed.*

Shift;

And we can only but imagine how that touch
must have felt [*and meant*]

And it isn't just the lepers or the outcast
the servant or the sinners
the blind or deaf or the mute
or the paralytics
the foreigner
the powerful and the wealthy
or the dispossessed
the children
or the aged

.... or one of the refugees from Eretria

Whoever they might be -
to Jesus -
.... it makes no difference
.... he teaches
.... he touches
.... He welcomes and He heals

And so it is today
Jesus comes into our lives
with no forgoing precondition
or worthiness on our part;

..... he comes to us by his love
.... and by His mercy
.... and through our brokenness

He comes into our midst to speak into our hearts and minds
.... healing our wounds
.... and whispering to us in our sadness and despair

He comes into our midst
.... to touch and allay our loneliness
.... our pain
.... our banishment

He comes into our midst
.... scattering his presence like wafers
.... and His compassion like drops of wine.

Just imagine - Jesus defied convention and custom
.... and logic
.... and did what had never been known;

“³He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, I do choose. Be made clean!’ Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.”

He reached over and touched –
and He restored
and He healed the leper.

Just imagine –
[Just imagine] Jesus touched the untouchable.
And Jesus touches our lives today.

Then ask yourself this;

So – where might they **[the lepers]** be in your life? *[in my life]*

What might you do for them?

and then discover

what they can do for you!

Amen

***You may [or may not] be aware that later today we are hosting a visit
from the Newcastle West End Refugees***

And in view of that

***I thought I'd leave you with just a few thoughts by way of a Sermon
Footnote;***

In Paul's epistles the compassion seen and known in Christ
is understood as a gift given to the Christian community,
whose holiness and unity are witnessed through;

.... mutual love,
.... compassion and service.

As you may well imagine
our friend from Eritrea and other places are **NOT** likely to be of our
faith

But it is to know The Koran also speaks of God as;

“the merciful and compassionate”,

.... words which precede every sura except one,
and which are used frequently as a Muslim prayer or
blessing.

In sura 7;

“.... God’s mercy is said to encompass all things”

and a hadith says of God;

“.... that his mercy takes precedence over his anger”

Compassion, *[like sympathy]*
is literally a suffering *[with and alongside]* the other.

As Bishop Lancelot Andrewes said in a sermon;

“compassion is but passion at rebound”.

Christians will find in the Cross of Christ
the cost and expression of the ***Divine compassion*** —

but that compassion *[as I’ve just suggested]*
is not strange to Muslims.

It is to that compassion that we ***ALL*** need to return,

.... to point too,

.... and to live out at a time when a dangerous fanaticism and
violence, *[blind to mercy and compassion]*
distorts religion
and wreaks havoc on the world.

We must never overlook the nature of Divine Compassion;

***nor must we overlook what we might you do for others
and then discover
what they might do for us!***

Amen