

Epiphany 6
15/2/2009

Mark the Evangelist

2 Kings 5:1 - 14

Psalm 30

I Corinthians 9:24 - 27

Mark 1:40 - 45

Leprosy and atonement

A leper came to him, begging to be healed. It sounds simple, but in Mark's day the action was more than a horrible thought, it broke the rules of proper conduct and was likely to render the person approached untouchable, causing further social separation. What the ancient people called leprosy is not identical with the modern version - Hansen's disease. But the two have the same things in common: dread, stigma and social ostracism. In the first section of Mark, Jesus moves about with increasing authority as a teacher and preacher and his ministry extends to exorcism and healing. Today the focus is on Jesus' power to heal. Leprosy was seen as one of the most difficult diseases to handle. When the leper approaches, Jesus is faced with a real test. The leper has blatantly disregarded the rules of conduct, and there are some ancient texts that suggest it made Jesus angry. The question might be, was Jesus angry at being approached, or was he angry at the leper's condition and what it represented.

The scholars tend to the view that the evidence falls in favor of Jesus being moved with compassion when he touched the leper and declared him healed. Touching a leper will not give you leprosy. The action has to be understood metaphorically – it involved touching an unclean person. Even this was not a huge problem. Uncleanness was an everyday risk and there were straightforward rules and procedures for how to deal with the problem.

But in this encounter the leper did not contaminate the Jesus: Jesus decontaminated him. Within Mark's frame of reference the nearness of the Kingdom translates into wholeness and freedom for lepers. The nearness of the Kingdom means the most putrid and ostracized among us is embraced and touched by merciful love: love that has the power to transform and set free. Mark's message is that in Jesus the power of God has come out towards us, and touches us at our most despised point. This is the Good News.

There are two or three other things in this text. The leper came to Jesus saying: "If you choose, you can make me clean". This is another one of the occasions when Mark tells us that while those in authority resisted Jesus and began to plot against him, the most rancid outsiders were able to see what mercy was gifted to the world in him, and called upon that gift. Jesus chose to respond.

After the healing Jesus told the man to follow the Mosaic code and show himself to the priest and make the normal sacrifices. The visit to the priest was normal. A person who claimed to be healed of leprosy had to be cleared by the Temple authorities before they could re-enter the community. But later Mark has the authorities accuse Jesus of showing disrespect for the Law. Not so. In this case Jesus fulfils the law. The subtext may be that the authorities had become twisted in their view of what Jesus was saying and doing.

Being cleared by the authorities included telling the priests what had happened. Beyond that Jesus sternly exhorted the leper to say nothing. But he could not. The grace that had worked in him was too powerful and he "*proclaimed freely*". In Luke (19:39-40) when Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph on Palm Sunday, the Pharisees order him to silence his disciples. He replied: "... *if these were silent, the stones would shout.*" The powerful word, that chaos and darkness heard, was at work in the world, and for sheer joy in the grace of God, tongues were loosened in praise. So it was for the leper.

Perhaps to escape a virtual tsunami of requests for healing, Jesus retreated to the desert. He who reached out and touched one who lived on the periphery of life himself had to move to the periphery. This is where it began, in the country, the wilderness, the far off places: the environment in which Jesus refined the clear focus for his work. When Jesus draws aside he is responding to the pressures that would damage his single-minded interest in proclaiming the nearness of God's reign. There is a link between this and what Paul says in Corinthians: "*run in such a way that you may win*". It is not about winning or gaining a prize. It is about staying focused. It means practicing the sort of spiritual discipline that keeps the Gospel at the centre, and allows the message to reach its target.

A leper came to him, begging to be healed. He saw the gift and sought to access it. He understood that the power of God has the capacity to embrace us at the point where we are most remote from everything that is life giving.

A Hospital Chaplain was visiting an AIDS patient who was deeply afraid. He believed his body was bleeding and would threaten his life, and contaminate others. The conversation between the two was stilted and stressed. The man, who could not see his torso, lifted up his shirt and asked the Chaplain to see if he was bleeding. She looked down, reached out and put her hand on his chest. The conversation changed. He immediately became seriously engaged, and they began to talk about real things.

The power of merciful, reconciling love has come amongst us, to touch us and heal us, and to bring life and freedom. This is the gift we have received. Freely may we share it with others, to the glory of God.
