

## Revd. Dcn. Ish Smale Matins Sermon 29/01/12

### **In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.**

If I have endured a very long, boring, sermon (not in this Cathedral of course) I often use the expression, 'That sermon made Ben Hur seem like an epic.'

But of course the 212 minute, 15 million dollar, budget movie, back in 1959 **was** an epic.

Although the 9 minute chariot race has become one of the most famous sequences in cinematography, for me one of the most moving scenes was when Ben Hur's mother and sister contracted leprosy and were later miraculously healed, at the point where Jesus is crucified.

**But that was just a movie.**

However leprosy **was** rife in the time of Jesus. It was a disease that reduced a human being into a hideous wreck. In New Testament times, any skin disease rendered the sufferer unclean, that is why Jesus told his disciples to heal the sick and cleanse the lepers.

#### **The leper was:**

Banned from society.

Had to live outside the camp.

Had to walk around with torn clothes, a shaved head and have the upper lip covered.

And perhaps worst of all was not allowed to go near anyone, including family and friends.

If someone came into view they would have to shout out 'unclean'.

Not only were lepers barred from all normal social interaction but they were also excluded from the assembly of God. People did not feel sorry for lepers, they felt revulsion. Lepers were unclean, contagious, and judged.

**Britain took a similar stance in the middle ages.** It merely applied the Mosaic law. The priest wore his stole, carried a crucifix, led the leper into the Church and read the burial service over him or her. The leper was pronounced dead, even though they were still alive. From then on the leper would wear a black garment that all would recognise. A leper must never enter a Church building but they were allowed to look through the 'leper squint', that was cut into many Church walls. The leper not only had to bear the physical pain of the disease, they had to bear the mental anguish and the heartbreak of being completely banished from human society and totally shunned.

There was no cure for Leprosy. But if a person had some other skin disease that had been mistaken for leprosy and was cured, they had to undergo a complicated ceremony of restoration as described in Leviticus 14 before they could be pronounced clean. Including examination by a Priest.

### **Jesus came to reverse this situation.**

Part of his life on earth was to see that lepers were healed, included, and redeemed. In our reading the leper ran up to Jesus but instead of shouting 'unclean' he shouted '**if you are willing** you can make me clean.'

'If you are willing' is an interesting request.

'If you are willing' does not mean 'Jesus if you are in a good mood'. He meant 'if it is not out of line with the purpose of God you can make me clean.'

He seemed to have no doubt about Jesus' power and submitted to His will.

### **A little aside.**

God has the ability to heal everyone but as hard as it is to understand, we also need to recognize that God has the right not to heal everyone. As difficult as it sometimes is, we need to submit to His will and recognise that we do not know what is best, only He does. Some of my charismatic friends claim that 'God is always willing' and always wants to heal everyone but Jesus did not correct the leper when he posed the question 'if you are willing.'

At the other extreme, some of my cessationist friends, who believe that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased early in Church history find it hard to believe that God 'ever wants to heal anyone today', which to me, is just as unbiblical.

Last Sunday at the Sung Eucharist the Chancellor informed us about our own beloved St Richard who performed many miracles and supernatural healings. Do we really believe that he did these things? I personally do not find it hard to believe that if St Richard was a man who both knew God's will and believed in God's power.

### **Anyway back to our story.**

Now remember, the leper was not allowed to approach people.

The newly formed disciples, who had just met Jesus, would have felt very uncomfortable with this leper intruding into their space and must have felt the inclination to pick up stones and start throwing them at him as they had every right to do.

But Jesus' responded with compassion. Most translations note, Jesus felt sorry for the guy, but some early manuscripts read that Jesus was 'angry' rather than compassionate. Whether compassionate or angry, this point is important. Jesus does heal out of compassion, but also there is a place for righteous indignation at the effects of a disease on a person.

I get a little angry on my weekly pastoral visits to St Richard's hospital when I see patients suffering and in great pain from cancer and other illnesses. I think we all get angry when we see a disease or illness destroying our loved ones.

**This anger motivates**— and wants us as Tom Wright says, ***'to put things to right.'***

Whether out of compassion or anger, Jesus comes to reverse the curse of the effects of disease and isolation caused by leprosy.

Again to the shock of the disciples Jesus reached out his hand and touched him.

This was something that was forbidden because of course leprosy was highly contagious. By touching the leper Jesus was making himself unclean.

Two things could now happen, either Jesus could catch leprosy or the leper could catch Jesus.

Of course there could be only one outcome...the leper is wonderfully healed

Jesus tells the leper to remain silent about his healing, except to show himself to the priest. The priestly cleansing would enable the leper to once again join the assembly of God at the temple and synagogue. But there was also this strong warning about remaining silent.

### **Why would He say this?**

At this point in time, Jesus does not want or need publicity. His priority is His mission. He is more concerned in conducting the business of his messianic task rather than touting his messianic status. He wants to be able to move among the cities of Galilee freely but instead, he ends up having to find refuge from the crowds in the 'desolate and deserted places.' From now on everyone

would crowd around Him to see a miracle rather than to actually listen to the words that He has to say.

This is understandable, even today we can be far more interested in what Jesus can do for us and the blessings we can receive..... rather than worshipping Him or wanting to learn from His teachings.

**Sadly this leper clearly disobeyed Jesus.** I'm sure in his excitement his intentions were good. He wanted everyone to rejoice with him and to know what this Jesus had done. But just because his intentions were good.... That does not mean that his actions were right.

**But the forgiving and compassionate Jesus still made the leper clean.** As a missionary, part of the purpose of my life is to try to gently remind people that because we are all sinners we all desperately need Jesus to heal, restore, forgive and cleanse us. Because of Jesus, the leper was made clean and started a brand new life on earth. Because of Jesus, the believer is also made clean, all their sins are forgiven and is also able to start a brand new life.

**But there is a big difference.** The leper was told not to tell anyone. You and I have been given the opposite instruction.

So let's do as Jesus instructed and go into **all the world** and preach the good news of Jesus to all creation!