

Martin White. 6<sup>th</sup> April 2008. Matthew 8:1-3

### Jesus' evangelism: Healing the man with leprosy.

I heard someone say once, that whenever he was asked the question "How can you believe what the Bible says about Jesus healing the sick and raising the dead?" he asked a question back - "If God were to come into our world and live among us, what do you think He would be like?"

Over the Easter week I managed to watch a few programmes and films about Jesus that were on TV and found myself crying a couple of times as I watched parts of The Passion on BBC.. I think that the reason I was so moved by it (even although it was just a version on the BBC is that I believe it pointed towards the answer to that question.

I want to look this morning at one of the first encounters with people Jesus has - at the beginning of His public life and ministry. Matthew, the writer has just finished recording the "Sermon on the Mount" for the last 3 chapters, where Jesus has been teaching His followers. Straight away after this, as He is walking off the stage, in effect, he meets a leper. Matthew 8:1-3 says this:

*"When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."*

*Jesus (filled with compassion - Mark 1:41) reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy."*  
Matthew 8:1-3

Whenever there is an election, you hear the candidates talking beforehand about what they're planning to do if they are elected, but often there is a disappointment once they are in power - their walk doesn't match their talk. Sometimes people can have a respect for a person, but when they get up close, they find that the person doesn't match up in real life to what people thought about them at a distance.

Jesus has just taught some of the greatest moral teaching ever, love your enemies, blessed are the poor in spirit, turn the other cheek, And you can imagine, having heard all this, everyone was desperately hoping that it wasn't all too good to be true.

Then, straight away, (although it wasn't meant that way), the question is asked of Jesus - are you who you claim to be? We've just heard your teaching; can you back it up?

Can you imagine the gasp that must have gone up among the crowd - everything is at stake here. This is the difference between them having listened to an amazing teacher, and actually having an encounter with God.

I guess that the whole crowd must have been holding their breath, waiting to see what happens next, desperately hoping that it's going to be more than just words, hoping that they wouldn't have to go home and tell their wives "I heard an amazing person teaching today, with real authority - i really thought He might be the One we were waiting for... but then he couldn't heal a leper, so it was just words.

The man with leprosy says "**Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.**"

This is an amazing statement, because it shows that he has faith and is confident in Jesus' ability - "you can..."; But he is not as confident in His willingness - "If you are willing..." - as he was an outcast.

I need to explain a bit of background about Leprosy in order to explain this statement.

- In the first century, leprosy was a contagious, incurable disease. Being diagnosed as having leprosy was equivalent to being told you were as good as dead.

There is a story in the Old Testament about someone called Naaman who had leprosy:

**Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.**

...The king of Aram (said). "I will send a letter to the king of Israel."... The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life?" 2 Kings 5:1-7

The king of Israel's reaction was that he couldn't give or take away life - in other words, the leprosy meant that Naaman was as good as dead.

- If someone was diagnosed with leprosy, their possessions would be burned, so they would immediately lose their property, and they would be sent away from their family to live outside of the community - in a leper colony.
- As well as being apart from their family, leprosy would also have made the person ritually impure and therefore excluded from the Temple - the centre of the Jewish religion, and therefore excluded from God's presence.
- And more than that, the word used in the Bible for leprosy was "Tzaraath" which literally meant "smiting" - so most people understood it to be the punishment of God on sin - so to have leprosy meant to be under God's curse.

So just like AIDS and HIV carried a prejudice and fear in the 1990's so having leprosy made you an outcast from society. More recently, Drug resistant TB.

So having just preached the best sermon in all of history, Jesus' first "test-case" encounter could hardly have been more massive - standing face to face with someone who was seen as being as good as dead, outcast from society, separated from God's Temple and God's people and disfigured in a way that everyone there recognised as being God's righteous judgement and curse on sin.

And this man is saying "I've just heard what you have said and I've seen who you are - you have the authority - the power to make me clean...if you want to."

This is a massive moment, because what happens next will show everyone what Jesus' teaching is worth in real life.

I think all of us have an idea, or at least a hope about what we think God should be like.

There was a famous American church leader - John Wimber who said once that he was in a taxi from the airport going to some church leader's conference in another city and the taxi driver, from the minute he got into the cab, started criticising Christians and saying how fed up he was at having spent all morning doing the run from the airport to this conference. He went on and on about how Christians were hypocrites and churches were after your money. John Wimber said he just kept quiet and listened, without letting on he was a church leader. Finally, just as he was getting out the taxi, he asked "What do you think Christians should be like then?"

The driver said "If that stuff was true, they would feed the hungry, heal the sick and not charge anyone to read the book."

In all of us there's a compass which tells us what's real and what's false. We are all good at smelling out stuff that just isn't right.

I think what happens next is exactly what we'd all hope would happen if God stepped into our world.

*"Jesus (filled with compassion - Mark 1:41) reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy."*

What he did was reach out and touch the man. He didn't need to - in the very next few verses he heals a Centurion's servant - just by saying a word. And the leper didn't ask Jesus to touch him - up to this point, the Bible doesn't record Jesus healing anyone - so he wasn't saying "you just touched that person and healed him - could you possibly do the same for me?" There wasn't a 'method' for healing people with leprosy - Elisha didn't touch Naaman in the Old Testament when he was healed of leprosy.

I don't think that Jesus had to touch him at all, but He was 'moved with compassion' (Mark's Gospel) and I think he looked and saw this man who probably had had no physical human contact at all since he had been diagnosed as a leper and his life had 'ended'..

So Jesus reached out and touched him and said "I'm willing; be clean."

According to the Jewish Law, if you touched a ceremonially unclean person, it made you ceremonially unclean for a period of time as well. So in touching him, if he hadn't been healed, Jesus would have been making himself an outcast as well.

When Callum (my son) was little, we had some friends up from Brighton to stay. They had a young daughter about Callum's age. The day after they went, they rang really apologetically to say that their daughter had just come out in chickenpox. Sure enough, 2 weeks later, so did Callum!

If you hang around ill people, then you can catch something, it doesn't usually work the other way round where you "catch wellness" off of someone. But that's what happened with Jesus.

The Law said that if you touched someone with leprosy, then you would in effect, catch their uncleanness and become unclean yourself for a certain period of time.

What happened here was not that Jesus caught the man's leprosy and was tainted by his uncleanness, but that the man "caught" Jesus' wellness and His cleanness and was purified.

So what difference does this make to us?

What about us? - Guilty, outcast, feeling dirty, made a mess of our lives, spiritually dead? What would happen if we had an encounter like this with Jesus? We might know all the 10 commandments or try to live a good life - we might have heard all the talk, but what would it look like in our lives if we had an encounter with Jesus?

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I'm asking everyone here the same question the leper must have asked himself; it sounds good, but will it work for me? What would this look like in my life?

Does God judge? - Yes - the Bible says He will.

Does God hate our sin, the things we do wrong? Yes; the Bible says He hates it so much that He sent His Son to come and remove it - in effect to touch us with His purity and forgiveness.

What is God like? - What does God think of you? Is He harsh and judgemental? - No; He is moved with compassion.

I want to tell you that God is able to purify us - to give us a brand new start - whatever we have done. The scary bit is us saying to Him "You can; but do you want to? Are you willing to do it for me too?"

The leper in this story took a huge risk in coming to Jesus. What would have happened if Jesus had just said "You are like this because you are under God's judgement because of your sin - and you deserve it!" Where could the man have gone then? This was his last and only chance. There was no-one else who could change things; no self-help programme for lepers - or sinners.

He took the biggest risk - and touched the compassion and cleansing and healing of God.

And he would have gone away from this encounter completely different - accepted, cleansed, healed; and once he had shown himself to the priests and offered the right sacrifices, he would have had his family and remaining property and life restored.

This is a story from almost 2000 years ago - I believe that it is true; and I believe it is absolutely up-to-date and relevant for us in 2008.

In the 1940's a cure for leprosy was found - a drug called Dapsona, and nowadays there are very effective multi-drug therapies. But there's still no medical cure for sin guilt and shame and separation from God and death.

The amazing news I want to finish with this morning is that God is everything we hope He would be - and more. And if we have the courage to say the same thing to Jesus that the man with leprosy dared to say, Jesus will give us the same reply - "I am willing, be cleansed, be healed, come and enter into My life - let my goodness and grace and love and peace infect you!"

Jesus looks at us and is still moved with compassion and is still in the business of reaching out and touching lives today.