

Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

October 12th 2025: Trinity 17

The Healing of the Lepers

Jesus is heading south, on his way to Jerusalem. He has set his face towards the holy city, where he knows he will die a very unholy death. At the point where we meet him meeting the ten lepers, he is in territory which was not much less repellent to the Jews than lepers were: Samaria. Luke calls it the country between Samaria and Galilee, which presumably means between the city of Samaria and the region of Galilee.

Any visible and disfiguring skin disease, visible by its whiteness, was the cause of fearful concern at the time. In the Jewish law there were complex rules about it, not least about when isolation was required; and how it was down to the priests to determine when someone was healed. Check out Leviticus 13. This is why Jesus told the lepers to go to the priest, so they could be declared clean and thus free.

In fact, leprosy (now known as Hansen's Disease) was infectious, so isolation was understandable and appropriate, just as it was during the Covid pandemic five years ago. I remember, when we were first allowed out and about, how people avoided each other in the street, crossing over to put distance between them.

But that avoidance, and the fear that it can breed, easily becomes emotive and irrational. Avoidance for good public health reasons can morph into ostracism and aggression. This is why the idea of lepers has taken on a figurative meaning too: people we fear or hate, but without any rational basis. The basis is usually prejudice, founded in otherness or difference. At the moment we can see this being stoked up by populist nationalist politicians in many parts of the world, including this country and – to a disgraceful and violent extent – in the US. Some even try to tether a warped version of Christianity to this, which is quite simply blasphemous.

This all converges on the situation Jesus finds himself in in that gospel story. The lepers will have been required to stay away from everyone else, for legitimate health reasons. But that everyone else will have inherited the fear which speaks of irrational alienation rather than rational concern for health and wellbeing.

And then there's the Samaritan one. He bears additional stigma, another layer of prejudice and exclusion. This is where the story of Jesus' healing reaches its climax. His healing is miraculous. His proximity to the lepers is alarming, reckless. But it's the man who suffers the double exclusion, the double stigma, who thinks to thank Jesus. No doubt the other nine couldn't wait to get away from the one who they'd been obliged to be isolated alongside, and get out of Samaria. Maybe they were even disconcerted by Jesus' fearless interaction with them.

So in the end this is a story about generosity and gratitude. Jesus was big enough not to be annoyed that only one of the ten came to say thank you. But the fact that it was a Samaritan who did so allowed Jesus to make a sharp point to his hearers (who would have been a combination of his followers, who were Jewish of course, and any bystanders, who would have been predominantly Samaritan). Yet again we see how his saving mission was to the whole world, Jew and Gentile. The days of Jewish exceptionalism were over.

It reminds us of the story (which comes in the next chapter of Luke) of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the Temple, praying. The pharisee talks of gratitude, but what he is thankful for is being pious and virtuous, unlike all the other awful people around him. The tax collector, bowed down with shame, simply offers searingly honest words of remorse.

When we take these gospel stories properly seriously, we can see how deeply challenging and radical Jesus' teaching was. His message should never be domesticated, made comfy. His love was radical, so ours must be too. We should be unnerved, perhaps provoked. But we can dare to let that provocation be the energy in our conviction, in our commitment to what Jesus asks and in our attempts to live that out. Only then will we start to build towards a godly kingdom of generosity, gratitude and daring love.