

Sermon: Jesus heals lepers

2 Kings 5.1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9.24-27; Mark 1.40-45

Intro

Philip Yancey writes in his book, *Where is God when it hurts*, about an NBA basketball player called Bob Gross; Bob Gross wanted to play an important game despite suffering from a badly injured ankle. The team doctor injected Marcaine, a very strong painkiller, into three different places of his foot.

Gross started in the game, but after a few minutes, as he was battling for a rebound, a loud *snap!* was heard throughout the arena. Gross did not realize this, and ran up and down the court two times, then crumpled to the floor. He felt no pain, but a bone had broken in his ankle. By overriding pain's warning system with the anesthetic, the doctor had caused permanent damage and ended the basketball career of Bob Gross.

Pain is our friend because it alerts us to the fact that something is wrong. People with leprosy are without this friend. They become horribly disfigured and diseased because pain is not there to warn them of danger.

Here in Egypt there is a colony for people with leprosy in Abu Zaabal, 25 miles north of Cairo. That colony houses about 750 patients, and another estimated 4,000 cured lepers are living in the adjoining villages. If you would go to Abu Zaabal you would see the impact of leprosy. Because people lose the ability to feel pain, they are not aware how they sometimes damage their bodies.

Many people there have badly disfigured hands, feet, faces. Imagine losing your nose, your hands, your mouth, would you dare to face other people?

Living with leprosy

Jesus regularly met with people suffering from leprosy. That by itself is amazing, because lepers did not live close to normal people. This is the law for lepers in the Old Testament:

The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.' He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live

alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Leviticus 13:45-46)

While Israel travelled through the desert, lepers had to live 'outside the camp'. Later, when the nation had settled in the promised land, lepers were forced to live outside the cities and far away from healthy people. Just as here in Egypt we lock them up in Abu Zaabel.

These people were the outcasts of their society; they had lost hope, and their self-respect, even their identity. In order not to infect other people, they had to live outside, far away from civilized society. And therefore, they could also never access the House of God. Even God seemed too far; they could not even come close to him.

We regularly meet with people who look perfectly healthy; but because of what they have gone through in the past, because of what people did to them, they feel just as disfigured as these lepers. Many of them have lost track; they do not know how to walk the road of life. Internal disfigurements can be deeply disruptive of normal social relations with people, and they often lead to a strong feeling that not only people, but God himself, is far away.

And many of these people live relatively normal lives; they may even sit here in church. On the surface all is fine – but inside – you may feel like a leper. Not good enough. Not good enough for people; not good enough for God. How painful.

The Christian writer and Oxford-scholar CS Lewis called pain the *megaphone of God*. Our pain is the result of deeper problems, and God is calling us to solve those together with him. If you suffer from this, do talk about it. Do not hide the grief. And never think your case is hopeless.

Jewish law explained what to do when someone would be healed of leprosy. According to the Laws of Moses (Leviticus 14), if a leper was cured of his disease, he should present himself to a priest, who had to then register the cure and give him a certificate that he needed for being reintegrated into the civil and religious life of Israel. Leviticus also prescribes the purifications and sacrifices he should offer. After Jesus had healed the leper of our Gos-

pel reading, he told him to follow those instructions carefully.

Israel had laws about what to do in such cases, but was there ever any case of someone being healed? In the Old Testament we read of one person only: Naaman, the Syrian. He was not even a Jew. Alfred Edersheim, a Jewish follower of Jesus Christ, wrote this:

Not only did rabbinism never suggest the cure of a leper, but [...] its treatment of those sufferers presents the most marked contrast to that of the Saviour. [Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Hendricken Publishers, 1993, 2009), p. 340]

In Israel, the healing of lepers was seen as proof that the time of the Messiah had come. Interestingly, the Jewish writings knew a strange title for the Messiah: one of his titles was 'The Leprous', based on Isaiah 53:4 that says: 'He took up our infirmities, he carried our sorrows.' Rabbi Joshua ben Levi wrote in Sanh 98a that Elijah had told him that 'The messiah is present in the world bandaging the sores of people with leprosy.'

In no better way could Jesus show that he was the Messiah, than by healing leprous people. Was this maybe why he also insisted that the man who was healed had to see the priests for the purifications and offerings? Was this a way for Jesus to spread the word in Israel that the Messiah had really come?

Jesus was 'moved with pity'

The leper fell at Jesus' feet and begged him: 'If you will, you can make me clean.' He had heard of the miracle Jesus had done in the previous days, in the synagogue in Capernaum, in the house of Simon Peter, and all over Galilee.

'If he can help all those people, can he not also heal me?' What a trust this leper showed in Jesus. And Jesus was not only able, he also wanted to heal the man. 'I will', Jesus said. What is the will of Jesus? Maybe it is best summarized in 1 Timothy 2:4. Our Saviour wants all people to be saved and to know him. To be saved entails our wellbeing in all aspects of our life - and of our eternal life.

We read: 'Jesus was moved with pity' when the leper came to him. The Greek says: 'He was moved in his inner beings.'

When people saw lepers, they were mostly afraid for contagion, and disgusted by the stench of the open sores. But Jesus saw past the disease. Past the dirt. He saw the person and his need for salvation and knowledge of God. The Gospels often mention this tenderness of Jesus for the people he came across. His love was not condescending; it was real. His love was so real that anyone meeting with him in faith, was lifted up.

Living in the midst of many religious leaders who placed all emphasis on legal trivialities, Jesus stands out as the one whose emphasis is on the heart of the laws of God: justice, mercy, faithfulness. The sorrows of the people are his sorrows. He took their diseases on himself and suffered from them. It hurt him inside. He was so involved in their misery, that he himself could be called 'the Leprous'.

When the leper came to Jesus, the masses around Jesus shrunk back, appalled. They were afraid to become unclean. They did not want to touch those people who were far away from God. They preferred their own liturgical cleanliness over showing compassion and love, and friendship, to those people from outside their own camp. They were not prepared to touch those who were different.

But Jesus was different as well. He himself went outside the camp, to suffer for us all, and no wonder that he desired to heal those others who were outside the camp. The great physician was there to heal. This is encouraging for us, and for all people who feel different, or rejected by others. Who feel that they are outsiders, outside the camp of 'civilized society'.

Many people walk around with feelings about themselves that make them think that they are isolated, different, not really in touch with other people. 'Imagine that others would know my past. Or how I feel. Or what I have done...' Lots of people suffer from inner problems that block them from relating deeply to others.

And Jesus is moved with pity for such people. For you, if this is you. He is hurting for people who are hurting.

So Jesus touched him

'Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him.' These are small words, but with explosive meaning. Jesus touched the man, purposely. He doesn't

always lay hands on those that He is healing. When He does, we ought to ask if it has significance. What is the significance here?

This was an amazing moment for that leper. How many years had he not been touched? Imagine, no-one ever touching you. People always staying away from you. Jesus comes and touches.

We do not have to be pure, clean, perfect people for God to reach out to us. The leper who was not able to enter the temple where God lived, well, he was reached by God himself. We, completely inadequate people, really do not have to perform well, be rather good, and climb up to him. He comes down to us.

The fact that Jesus touched the leper is also explosive for Jewish religious leaders. It was, in their view, a very bad thing to do. Jesus made himself unclean by touching the man, according to religious laws of Israel. But a higher law was at work here: that of divine love. We do not make God unclean by our lives; he does not maintain a distance because of who we were, or are. By touching us, we become clean. We are healed.

The leper was told by Jesus to go to the priest to show that God had done a mighty miracle, to show that the Messianic times had come. But he had to keep quiet about Jesus to all other people. 'Don't tell this to anyone (Mark 1:43) But the man did not listen to these words of Jesus. **Read** Mark 1:45.

Some Bible commentaries are very negative about the man, because he did not obey the words of Jesus. One of them writes:

We see [the leper] at his worst. By this act of inexcusable disobedience he deprived many towns of the blessings that might have come their way if Jesus could have en-

tered. [William Hendriksen, *Mark* (NTC) (1975, 2009), p.81]

I do not think we have the right to be so negative about the man. Imagine that you have been healed, that your sins are forgiven, that you have an open relationship with God. Would you not shout it from the rooftops? Would you not tell all you former fellow lepers that healing is possible?

I think the leper was much less disobedient to Jesus Christ than we are; he commanded us to speak of him, but we don't. He told us to go to the highways and byways to bring all people to God's meal, and what do we do?

Jesus is still touching people. And he mostly uses his church for this. His body that is called to be God's healing presence in the world, and to touch those who need it. But as a church we are so often uncommunicative; we do not go out into the world. We keep away from those outside the camp. 'It is so much nicer to be with our own sort of people, is it not?'

Conclusion

As human beings, we carry all sorts of problems through life. For some of us, the loads are so heavy, so heavy that we hardly dare to meet with people, let alone with God. Allow Jesus to touch you. Allow other people to come close to you to be part of God's healing work. In your life.

We are all called to be the hands of God in this world, to do the works of Jesus Christ. Let us this week wonder whom we may bless by being present in the name of Christ. Your arm around the shoulder of someone else can be so healing for that other person.

+ In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit