

10 October 2010 at All Saints Faith and Miracles

2 Tim. 2, 8-15; Ps. 66, 1-11; Luke 17, 11-19

What would you do if you met someone suffering from leprosy? To encounter someone with a disfiguring condition or disease can produce all kinds of reactions in people. The one suffering and the one not suffering may experience all kinds of thoughts and feelings, both good and bad, on either side.

In biblical times leprosy was completely incurable and meant certain ostracism from society. The book of Leviticus orders people to live alone and outside the camp, well away from everybody else. The person concerned was to shout “Unclean, unclean”, thereby guaranteeing total seclusion from his friends and family. The disease meant ritual uncleanness, and for a Jew to touch a sufferer brought instant defilement, almost as if the disease was a sign of God’s disfavour. The prospect of a leper being cured was about as likely as being raised from the dead.

As Jesus is on his way and arrives outside a village, he comes across a group of ten lepers. Not terribly surprising – if you couldn’t mix with clean people, then you formed your own little clique at a distance from the rest of the community. Since they had no land to till and no livestock to look after, they would have relied on the charity of others for food and other necessities.

Suddenly they see Jesus and shout out “Master, take pity on us!” They don’t ask for healing, but for pity – for whatever Jesus might give them, maybe food or clothing or shelter, or perhaps something else.

If you were suffering from a permanently disfiguring disease you would probably cry out for pity as well, especially if you were also homeless. But what are they actually asking Jesus for? Is it food or shelter or clothing, or to be rid of their disease? The text of the gospel offers us no certainty.

Now Jesus sends them off to the priests. According to Jewish law it is only the priests who have the power to declare someone healed of leprosy – that is, clean and fit to re-enter society. Jesus doesn’t say that they are healed, but he implies it, and therefore they must go and seek a clean bill of health from the official who can grant it. The verb in the Greek text

here is specifically the one used to heal a person who has been made ceremonially unclean.

And now, at the very point where the lepers obey Jesus and set off to the priest, they are cured. Again, the Greek text is specific – the healing is instant and not over a period of time. Obeying Jesus’ command brought instant healing. If the lepers had laughed at his instruction as if it were illogical, there would have been no healing. Having faith brought the greatest reward they could have hoped for.

We talk about people “having faith”, but it doesn’t exist in a vacuum – faith is exhibited in what we actually do. The lepers believed in what Jesus said and were cured as they went towards the priests. In the letter of James, James says: “In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

-----

We are not told how the lepers discover that they are healed, but they are, and it probably doesn’t take too long. And as soon as one of them discovers this miraculous fact, St Luke records the fact:

“One of them, finding himself cured, turned back with shouts of praise to God. He threw himself down at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.”

All ten of the lepers are healed, but only one comes all the way back, shouting and praising God for his mercy in healing him. The leper may not know that Jesus is the Messiah and the son of God, but he certainly credits Jesus as God’s instrument of healing.

What’s the big surprise here? That the only thankful person is a Samaritan, a non-Jew. The Jews and Samaritans were proverbially hostile towards each other, separated by deep differences in ancestry, religion and history. Here we see our Lord’s sympathy for a foreigner. The outcast is praised for his attitude, but the Jews are condemned.

Jesus is well aware that, by and large, God’s people have rejected his appointed son – St John summarizes many examples when he says (John 1.11) “He came to his own and his own people would not accept him. But to all who did accept him, to those who put their trust in him, he gave the right to become children of God.”

Now our Gospel reading comes to a swift conclusion when Jesus tells the Samaritan to get up and go on his way, for his faith has cured him. So this leper has received more than the others did. Nine were given healing, but by his exceptional praise the Samaritan has received a deeper salvation. By coming back to thank Jesus, personal contact has produced a healing which is more than skin deep. Timothy in his letter also talks about the certainty of salvation and that the faithful will be rewarded.

-----

Well, what are WE disciples meant to learn from all this? Perhaps the most obvious thing is that outsiders can be the most responsive of God's people, and that regular and "established" believers can sometimes suffer from spiritual deafness. Those who have been the longest in the congregation are not necessarily the most spiritually mature or deep. We are wrong if we assume that it is only Christians with spiritual acuity. Jesus is in the business of saving sinners and he doesn't discriminate on the basis of religion or the lack of it.

Perhaps a foreigner or person of another faith may suddenly walk into our life and make us see things in a new way. Britain is becoming a multi-cultural and multi-faith society – can we truly say that immigrants have nothing to teach us? Are those who go to the mosque really inferior to us?

We must act in faith. It's clear from the story of the lepers that the faith that cleansed them was by acting on Jesus' words. When they were told to go to the priests their healing was very rapid; they obeyed Jesus and were instantly healed; if they had looked themselves up and down and seen their disfigured bodies before setting off, they would never have started. We sometimes want instantaneous healing before we'll believe that Jesus heals us. But it doesn't work like that. The faith here is shown in the lepers going off to the priest and Jesus' response, "Your faith has made you well." All healing comes from God.

And above all, we must be thankful and show our gratitude. Jesus is clearly angry at the unthankfulness of the nine lepers who didn't come back but just went on their way. We must train ourselves to show and give thanks, and to be filled with thanksgiving. Our Lord won't be doing with ungrateful disciples. And yes, all this thankfulness can be time-consuming. It might mean going out of our way, or cancelling things we hold as important. A life of thanksgiving is essentially a life of prayer, before the things we have to do and before we get immersed in our daily activities. It's not easy and requires strength.

And after thanksgiving, gratitude is an equally important part of our salvation. Were all ten lepers saved? Yes, they were. Well, yes in the sense that they were rescued from their disease. But not in the sense of drawing closer to God in thankfulness and dependence. The nine were saved physically but not spiritually. “Where are the other nine?” Jesus demanded. Healing that doesn’t bring a person to Jesus is stunted and incomplete. A healing ministry cannot stand alone. It’s part of the wholeness of salvation that God desires.

The story of the lepers is set around the character of faith and the nature of the Kingdom of God. We are invited to believe in the Kingdom as momentous, and yet also profoundly simple. It is open to all, but rejected by many. It is not a thing to be observed, but as Jesus says in verse 21, “The Kingdom of God is within you!” The nine lepers took away their gift of healing like a cheap souvenir and failed to recognise Jesus as the agent of their healing and their encounter with the living God.

As we reflect on the miraculous, the now Blessed John Henry Newman might have an insight to offer us. In an essay on miracles in the Bible he reflected that belief required “a certain familiarity or intimacy of the mind with the thing believed.”

This suggests to me that belief in miracles cannot be separated from a living intimacy with Jesus Christ.

He continues: “Till it is in some way brought home to us and made our own, we cannot say we believe it, even when our reason receives it. Belief in the miraculous cannot be achieved by reason alone, but by transformative encounter with the living God.”

If we see miracles just as some sort of old-fashioned folklore or the cheap phenomena of Christian experience, we can have little hope that they will bring us to our knees in thanksgiving. But if they can nurture our familiarity with the atmosphere of God’s kingdom, then they will transform us into joyful outsiders to be brought within the company of saints and angels. Just like the Samaritan who left his companions to go back and give thanks.

