

Jesus' encounter with the man with leprosy

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Luke 5:12-16

8am / 3 December 2006 (AIDS Sunday)

In this series in which we are looking at encounters with Jesus we consider today the encounter Jesus has with the man suffering from leprosy. It is an appropriate encounter to consider on this Sunday when around the world the focus is on AIDS, which has been called *the modern day leprosy*.

As we look at this short passage I want to draw your attention to three things about this man and then three things in Jesus response to him.

As we consider what the text tells us about this man with leprosy.

Note firstly that he was isolated.

He was isolated physically, socially and psychologically.

In Leviticus very clear and harsh instructions were given about how those with infectious skin diseases were to be treated.

Lev 13:45 "The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!'

Lev 13:46 As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp.

In the interests of containing the disease and not allowing it to spread those who were infected were effectively banished from society. They were physically isolated.

They were no longer part of their families. They could no longer embrace their husbands and wives, they could not share in family celebrations, hold their grand children, attend the funerals of loved ones. They were socially isolated.

Not only did the sufferer have to face the pain and note the progression of the illness that left them more and more disfigured, immobile and in pain and despair; they had to do it alone. They were psychologically isolated.

The lament of the prophet Jeremiah would have been on their lips ...

Jer 16:7 There is no one to offer food to comfort those who mourn for the dead--not even for a father or a mother--nor will anyone give them a drink to console them.

No one to comfort. No one who come near with a meal. No one who would offer a drink of water. In fact if anyone came near they would be required to warn them off, "Unclean! Unclean! Don't come near me."

This man lived isolated – cut off, physically, socially and psychologically.

That is all too often the lot of those living with HIV/AIDS. There is a fear that disclosure of their status will lead to rejection and isolation. It is an illness carried secretly. It has a stigma and suggests shameful behaviour. In most cases that is not true of course as most suffers are women infected by their husbands or boyfriends. But that stigma remains, and with the sense of being isolated - physically, socially and psychologically.

Note secondly that he felt completely unworthy.

He says to Jesus, (vs 12)

"Lord, if you are willing ..."

He had obviously heard about Jesus. In the previous chapter Luke chronicles Jesus healing many sick people. Perhaps word had got to this man. But he does not presume. His life experience had taught him not to expect any act of kindness or compassion.

And he says these words from a position of being on the ground.

Luke records that he ...

"..fell with his face to the ground and begged ..."

He did not even dare look at Jesus. He hid his face and spoke to Jesus through the dust of the street.

What a picture of utter unworthiness. He did not even raise his eyes to look directly at Jesus.

Sadly in some instances this is true for those living with HIV/AIDS. There is a sense of shame and unworthiness. The assumption is that if you are HIV positive it is because you have done something you should not have done, and you are getting your just deserts. How can you possibly ask God for help.

Note thirdly that the man with leprosy felt and was dirty.

He had to dress like a beggar and wear torn clothes. He had to call out “Unclean!”. He was dirty on the outside and made to feel dirty on the inside. He was repulsive.

Note that Luke says that the man was covered with leprosy. This was no small infection. He was covered with uncleanness. He was dirty all over.

His request of Jesus was simply to be made clean. To be able to wash away the illness, the rejection, the dirt the smell, the isolation.

There has been good education drives to teach us as much about how one contracts AIDS as well as how one does not contract AIDS. It is not contracted through touch and hugging and holding some one physically. There is no need for anyone who is HIV positive to feel dirty and untouchable.

So this man with leprosy, like many who are living with HIV/AIDS today, felt isolated, felt unworthy, felt dirty and longed to be clean.

But note too the response of faith ...

*“Lord, if you are willing **you can** make me clean.”*

He knew Jesus could heal him.

You can do it Jesus. I don’t know how. Everything and everyone tells me that I am a lost cause. I am the walking dead. I am a corpse waiting to die. But you can turn that around.

Consider now Jesus response to this man and his plight.

Again we consider three things Jesus did.

Firstly he touched him.

Verse 13

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.

Can you imagine what that touch must have meant to the man. After all the years of isolation. All the years of his physical aloneness which flowed on into the sense of social and psychological isolation. Now as he lies with his face down in the dust, eyes looking at the feet of passers-by, he feels a hand on his shoulder ... or was it his head ... or his cheek.

- Jesus breaks across the barrier of isolation. He touches the untouchable. Later (7:14) he touches the coffin of the son of the widow of Nain.
- The woman with the issue of blood (8:44) comes up behind Jesus and touches his prayer shawl.

The touch of Jesus is powerful. It is healing. It breaks isolation. It expresses compassion. It brings hope.

If we ask ourselves in the light of some one having HIV/AIDS what would Jesus do? I think we have here the answer. He would put out a hand and touch the person.

Some one once asked in a seminar on our response to HIV/AIDS, what do you do when you hear that some one has AIDS? The answer: You just pitch up. The rest will take care of it self.

You just pitch up. He reach across the barriers of isolation and rejection. Nothing does that better than a physical touch.

Secondly Jesus speaks.

In response to his question,
“If you are willing ...”,
 Jesus says to the man with leprosy,
“I am willing ...”

This meets the man’s need of reassurance just as his words to Peter,
“Don’t be afraid”,
 meet his need of assurance that all will be well in the previous chapter after the miraculous catch of fish.

Those words are words we need to hear where ever we are or what ever circumstances we are in.

Jesus is willing to heal you. He loves you. He has not rejected you. Perhaps some one here this morning needs to hear those words. Perhaps you know them but need to hear them again this morning freshly. Jesus is willing. He is willing and able.

And then he says,
"Be clean"

That is interesting isn't it. Some times when he heals Jesus rebukes the illness (Peter's mother-in-law 4:39). Some times he heals simply with a touch and no words are spoken. But quite often he speaks to the person concerned.

He speaks to the crippled woman in 13:12
"Woman, you are set free from your infirmity."

He speaks to Jairus daughter and says in 8:54
"My child get up."

He speaks to the paralysed man in 5:23
"Get up and walk"

Here he says to the man with leprosy...
"Be clean"

There is a sense in which he is responding the man's request and faith and says to him grab it. Walk into it. Take hold of it. See yourself as clean. Treat yourself as some one who is clean.

We don't build a theology of healing out of this, but there is a sense in which we see here that we are not passive in the healing process. There is a response required ... get up, stand up, walk, be clean.

Again I believe that some here this morning need to hear that word.
 Walk out of your isolation.
 Stand on what God has said to you. Don't be passive and docile.
 Live as a clean person. Be what God has declared you to be.

Or as Paul put to the Philippians (2:12)
... work out your salvation with fear and trembling, (2:13) for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Thirdly Jesus says to the man give testimony

Luke 5:14 Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

While Jesus was breaking the stigma of isolation by touching the man, he was complying the requirements of the law. There was a procedure to follow whereby those were healed could be reinstated into the community. This man

needed to follow that process. His healing was not simply physical. It was social as well.

Again the man needed to walk into his healing. He needed to claim it and appropriate it. There was something to be done. There is a story to tell and their a testimony to share.

The thing that struck me freshly as I was preparing for this service was that HIV/ AIDS is an opportunity for testimony. It is a chance to declare the Kingdom of God has come near.

In that we are breaking the sentence of isolation.

In that we reach out across barriers of separation with a physical embrace.

In that we walk out of seeing HIV as making people dirty and unworthy of God's love and ours.

In that we don't allow people to suffer alone and in secret.

In that we recognise that this HIV/AIDS is not something individuals have but it is something we have corporately and we live inclusively and mercifully and compassionately.

In that we live like that we are giving testimony that God's kingdom has come near.

Conclusion

On Advent Sunday we are reminded of the great hope that is ours that the Lord will come again. That is both our hope and an incentive to live in the way Jesus lived and follow his example.

May we know ourselves encountered by Jesus in the way this man suffering from leprosy was, and receive his healing physically, socially and psychologically, discovering ourselves to be clean and walking into what Jesus has done for us.

And may we respond in the way he did and follow his example so that encounters that people have with us are like encounters with Jesus himself.