

9 October 2016

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
2 Timothy 2:8-15
Luke 17:11-19

At the beginning of our Gospel story today we have ten men who come to Jesus. At the end of the story we have just one of them.

Where do we find ourselves in this story? Among the ten? Or are we to be found with the one who alone comes back?

Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem – and to the decisive event he knew awaited him there. But on his way he passes along the border between Samaria and Galilee. Perhaps a little like “no man’s land”, this place is neither one thing nor the other; this is a place where neither Galilean Jew nor Samaritan is truly at home.¹ We may think of it as a liminal space, a space where the normal certainties are unsettled and where unexpected things might happen. Perhaps it might even be a “thin place where the veil between the material and spiritual worlds is lifted, and an awareness of their interconnection is more deeply known and felt.”²

In this space we see ten men who come to Jesus. These ten men have a skin condition which makes them ritually impure, excluded from society. Most modern bibles still supply the word “leprosy” for this condition, but include a footnote along the lines of “The word traditionally translated *leprosy* was used for various diseases affecting the skin.” The disease in question was in fact highly unlikely to have been leprosy (Hansen’s disease) as it appears almost certain that leprosy was not known in the biblical lands until a century or two after the time of Jesus.³ It is unfortunately confusing for us that the Greek word *lepra*, the word used in the Bible for some unknown skin disease, came to be applied to the dreadful and disfiguring disease that we associate with the term.

Whatever the particular skin condition in question, it requires that these men separate themselves from society until it disappears. They can’t physically approach

¹ Garland, *Luke*, p.688

² Garcia “Commentary”.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy#History>; Thiessen, p. 48. Thiessen provides an extended analysis of what is at issue with *lepra* and ritual impurity: pp. 9-20, 43-68.

Jesus – they are not allowed to, so they stand off at a distance – but they *come* to Jesus nonetheless by raising their voices to make their appeal to him: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

The mercy they are seeking from Jesus is not just a physical healing from their ailment, as important as that may be in itself: to be cleansed will restore them to normal life and to the community from which they are currently separated.⁴

The ten come to Jesus, the ten keep their distance, and the ten cry for mercy. And Jesus responds. Jesus has mercy on these social outcasts in this in-between space. Not only that, but in this place a merciful Jew runs the risk of inadvertently extending mercy to those who might also be *religious* outcasts: in this in-between space there can be no assumption that the men calling out for mercy are Jews like Jesus.

Jesus responds to the cry for mercy. But Jesus’ response is not one of an obvious overt act of healing. There is no touch, no symbolic action, no ritual words, no prayer of intercession from Jesus. Rather Jesus sends them to the priests. According to Levitical law, only a priest can certify that they are made clean and their ritual purity restored; only the pronouncement of a priest can restore them to society. The priest can *certify* the healing; but the priest can’t himself bring about the healing.⁵ The expected pattern is, first, healing, and then second, showing oneself to the priest. But as these ten are sent to the priests they are not yet healed. The ten men are therefore expected to have some agency in their own healing.⁶ They have to display just enough faith, just enough obedience, to turn from Jesus and head off towards the priests. Who knows what they might have thought as they started on their way.

Ten are sent to the priests and, as they obey and go, all ten are made clean. Jesus has indeed shown mercy on them, all ten of them.

⁴ Garland, *Luke*, p.689

⁵ Garland, *Luke*, pp. 689-690

⁶ This idea prompted by Garcia “Commentary”

But that is the last we hear of the ten as a group. We may rightly assume that they do in fact go to the priests, because not to do so would mean that they couldn't be certified as clean and couldn't re-enter the life of society. We may wonder what account they give of their experience. We just don't know; they disappear from view.

At the beginning of the story ten come to Jesus, ten have to keep their distance, ten cry for mercy, ten are sent by Jesus to show themselves to the priest, and ten are cleansed.

At the end of the story *one* comes to Jesus, *one* throws himself at Jesus' feet, *one* praises God for receiving mercy.

Presumably delaying his journey to the priests – which remains essential if he is to be accepted back into society – this one man first counts it necessary to give glory to God and to thank Jesus as the cause of his new life.

That this one returns – only one among the ten healed – is remarkable enough. But then it is revealed what he is: he is a Samaritan.

Over centuries Samaria had become a melting pot of cultural diversity, with much intermarriage and exchange between the different cultures and their religious practices. Those who did retain a connection to the Israelite religious heritage they shared with their southern neighbours focused their worship on Mount Gerizim and rejected anything associated with Jerusalem. Mutual suspicion festered and grew over the centuries.⁷ By the time of Jesus, the relationship was openly hostile. "The Samaritans were publicly cursed in the synagogues; and a petition was daily offered up praying God that the Samaritans might not be partakers of eternal life."⁸

We may be puzzled then to find that the band of ten is comprised of both Jews and Samaritans. There are two comments to make on this. The first is to recall that this incident took place in the border area, accessible to people of both nations. As a kind of "no man's land" it is an acceptable place for these people excluded from their respective societies to live. The second is to reflect that it is likely that the mutual

⁷ Garland, *Luke*, p.443

⁸ W O E Osterley, *The Gospel Parables in the Light of their Jewish Background*, SPCK, 1936, p.162, quoted in Bailey, *Peasant Eyes*, p.48

experience of exclusion due to disease overcomes the racial enmity: they are drawn together by their common need.⁹

The only one to return to give thanks to Jesus is a Samaritan. This is truly extraordinary: Jesus himself remarks upon it “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” We are reminded of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, in which a Samaritan is the only one who renders aid to the victim of a mugging.¹⁰ The parable challenges Jesus’ Jewish audience to see the Samaritan as one whom they are commanded to love as a fellow child of God. And by implication the priest and the Levite, the very kind of people who should be found within the people of God, are astonishingly found not to be neighbours – ironically because they are determined to keep themselves in a state of ceremonial purity within the system that had previously defined the boundaries of Israel as the people of God. In the parable Jesus was telling his Jewish audience that outsiders were coming into the kingdom of God while insiders might find themselves on the outer.¹¹ And now, as Jesus travels the border lands on his way to fulfil his destiny in Jerusalem, we find a real-life example of an outsider coming into the kingdom.

This Samaritan, this *one*, comes to Jesus, throws himself at Jesus’ feet, and praises God for receiving mercy. And Jesus’ response is to send this one into new life. Jesus says to the Samaritan prostrate at his feet, “Rise! Go!” The Greek word for “rise” has the same root as “resurrection”.¹² In this story we have a sign of the renewed life of the age to come, the life inaugurated when Jesus was eventually raised from the death he was to undergo in Jerusalem.

This one, sent into new life, has been saved. Healing is not the same thing as salvation. Salvation is to be drawn into a renewed restored relationship with God.

⁹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke*, cited in Dale, *Windows*, p.230; Garland, *Luke*, p.689

¹⁰ Garland, *Luke*, p.690

¹¹ Wright, *Luke*, pp. 126-129; Wright, *Victory*, pp. 305-307

¹² Wright, *Luke*, pp. 206-207

Through God's mercy mediated through Jesus, received with faith and gratitude, this one man has been brought into a new relationship with God.¹³

At the beginning of the story ten come to Jesus, ten have to keep their distance, ten cry for mercy, ten are sent to show themselves to the priest, and ten are cleansed. At the end of the story *one* comes to Jesus, *one* throws himself at Jesus' feet, *one* praises God for receiving mercy, *one* is sent on his way into renewed life, *one* is saved.¹⁴

The difference between the one and the rest of the ten is striking. All were healed, but what was it that led to their different responses?¹⁵ We are not told.

Were they just ungrateful?

Were they too caught up in what was "required" or "proper" or "expected" to recognise the work and person of God right in front of them?

Or did they just take God for granted? Eduard Schweizer comments that healing can in fact "lead away from salvation when we only want something from God and not God in this something."¹⁶ It seems that taking God for granted has ever and always been a risk. I am reminded that as they prepared to enter the Promised Land our ancestors in the faith, the Israelites, were told:

"When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give – a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, ... – then when you eat and are satisfied, *be careful that you do not forget the Lord*, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Fear the Lord your God, serve him only ..." [Deuteronomy 6:10-13]

Do we find ourselves with the one, or among the rest of the ten?

The same reasons for the different responses are as prevalent today as they were in the time of Jesus. Ungrateful. Too caught up in expectations. Taking God for

¹³ Garland, *Luke*, p.692

¹⁴ This analysis of the structure of the passage is drawn from Garland, *Luke*, p.688 who in turn notes his debt to the analysis of Frederick J Gaiser.

¹⁵ On the responses, see Garland, *Luke*, p.692

¹⁶ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke*, tr. David E Green, John Knox, 1984, p.269 cited in Garland, *Luke*, p.692.

granted. And added to these reasons we can see the rapid rise in our society today of a sense of entitlement; the “the world owes me” attitude; the attitude that says that the healing, restoring, forgiving activity of God in my life is mine as of right.

But *no*, it is not mine by virtue of my own right or deserving. It is mine because of grace, the unmerited goodness of God. And therefore I must be thankful.

At the end of the story it is only one who comes back to give thanks to Jesus and to praise God, and he is a Samaritan, not a Jew. The irony is that the very description “Jew” may derive from the name “Judah” which means “praise”.¹⁷ It is a Samaritan here who does what the Jews were called to be and do. The Jews are shown up, not living up to their calling.

We bear the description “Christian”. May it be an accurate description of us. May we truly be people who give thanks to God for his grace to us in Christ Jesus. May we truly be people who bear witness to Christ, proclaiming the good news that he is King, and being instruments of his grace to the pagans and into the in-between places of our own time.

Sources

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¹⁷ See Genesis 29:35. This point is made by Wright, *Luke*, p.206. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jews#Name_and_etymology