

LUKE 17:11-19
ST JOHN'S, 13.10.19, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

I expect we all have some experience of how it feels to be alienated from the people around us, cut off from contact with them, for whatever reason. Perhaps the people in our society who have the closest experience to these 10 lepers are those who are or who have been homeless. Their disease was only one of their problems. In first-century Palestine, lepers were kept separate by law, because the only way to prevent the leprosy from spreading was to keep lepers in quarantine. They weren't allowed to live among healthy people, they had to call out 'Unclean, unclean' so that no-one touched them by accident, and they had no way to earn their living. That's why these 10 men had to stand at a distance and shout to get Jesus' attention.

FAITH

We might expect Jesus to have touched these men as he healed them. For people who'd been forced to keep their distance, even from their families, a touch would have been extremely powerful. Jesus didn't usually mind touching people with leprosy. In chapter 5, Luke tells how he healed a leper by touching him. So why didn't Jesus go over and touch these 10 men to heal them? Why did he keep his distance?

It's a fair assumption that Jesus wanted to test these men's faith. He did that, in various ways, with almost everyone he healed. In this case, Jesus tested the lepers' faith by telling them to act as if they'd already been healed – he didn't touch them, and neither did he tell them that

they were healed. He simply told them to go and let the priests examine them. The priests were like health inspectors. One of their jobs was to certify that people really had been cured of a skin disease.

The men showed that they did have faith that Jesus was able to heal them. They all did as Jesus told them; they all went off to show themselves to the priests. They all had enough faith to take him at his word. They were cured as they were on their way to the priests.

So far so good. But for all we know, the nine lepers who didn't return to Jesus might have given thanks to God for their healing, in the synagogue. They might even have travelled to Jerusalem to give thanks in the Temple. But Jesus implies that the only grateful one was the one who came back. And it's only to this one man that Jesus says, *your faith has made you well*, even though all 10 had already been made well.

Jesus clearly expected all 10 to come back to him in order to give praise to God and give thanks for their cure. The point is that they'd received their healing through Jesus; through Jesus, the kingdom of God had come upon them. They could only truly give God the glory for what had happened by returning to Jesus to do so.

Jesus hadn't just cured these men of leprosy. He'd tried to point them to himself, to show them that they needed to put their faith in him for much more than a cure from leprosy. Jesus wanted to rescue them from the death they deserved for disobeying God, and to give them life in all its fullness.

Even in our own day and age, it's not as uncommon as we might think for people, even non-believers, to call on the Lord when they're in some kind of trouble. Often, they receive the help they ask for. But they then turn away from God again. One example is John McCarthy, who was a hostage in Beirut for several years in the 1980s. He tells this story of what happened when he'd been a hostage for a couple of months, during which he'd been in a cell on his own:

After two months with not the slightest hint that I might be released I got more frightened . . . I really began to doubt that I could cope alone.

One morning these fears became unbearable. I stood in the cell sinking into despair. I felt that I was literally sinking, being sucked down into a whirlpool. I was on my knees, gasping for air, drowning in hopelessness and helplessness. I thought that I was passing out. I could only think of one thing to say - 'Help me please, oh God, help me'. The next instant I was standing up, surrounded by a warm bright light. I was dancing, full of joy. In the space of a minute, despair had vanished, replaced by boundless optimism.¹

After that story in his book, there's not much more, if any more, about John's relationship with God, and it was only when I read an article about him much later, that I learned that he also read right through the Bible twice, while he was a hostage. But, as far as I know, John McCarthy hasn't yet become a believer.

Coming back to our story this morning, only one leper came back to Jesus. He was ready to tell the world about what God had done for him - he praised God in a loud voice. Now he was cured, there was no reason not to come close to Jesus, so he came and fell down at Jesus' feet. Normally, Samaritans and Jews had no contact with each other, but this man realised that Jesus had made no distinction between him and the other lepers. Jesus had torn down the normal barrier between them. (Jesus' comment about this Samaritan being a foreigner implies that the other nine lepers were Jews).

And so Jesus was only able to tell one man that he was rescued. At the end, when Jesus says to this man, *your faith has made you well*, it means more than his physical cure. The verb in Greek can also mean 'save'. Jesus actually says to him *your faith has saved you*. The man's physical cure means that his relationship with his family and friends has been restored. Jesus assures him here that he's also received a spiritual cure, which means that his relationship with God has also been restored. It doesn't matter that he's a Samaritan, a foreigner, as Jesus calls him, not recognised as belonging to God's people. From now on, he's a member of God's family, despite his lack of pedigree.

CONCLUSION

I started this morning talking about feeling alienated from people around us. This story's full of a sense of alienation, distance and separation, right up to the point when the one healed leper came back to throw himself at Jesus' feet. The 10 lepers stood at a distance; Jesus kept his distance, and told them to go and show themselves to

the priests; as they went, the distance between the lepers and Jesus was becoming greater. But when the one came back, all alienation, distance and separation between himself and Jesus, between himself and God, was overcome. Now he was healed, he no longer had to stand at a distance – he came and threw himself at Jesus' feet.

Although he was a Samaritan, and Jesus a Jew, that barrier no longer existed. And as he came back to thank Jesus for his healing, Jesus was able to assure him that his faith had saved him – the barrier of sin between him and God no longer existed, either.

Today, you and I can share the experience of this one grateful former leper. Whether or not we have a physical ailment, and whether or not we receive physical healing, Jesus longs to speak to each one of us the words he speaks to this man: *your faith has saved you.*

So let's resolve this morning, to be like the leper who returned to Jesus to give thanks and praise to God. Yes, let's ask our Lord for healing, or whatever else we long to receive from him; let's also exercise the faith to accept that he'll respond by giving us whatever is truly best for us, which may not be exactly what we've asked for. Let's remember that all good things come from God. Above all - let's praise him with a loud voice, and fall on our knees at Jesus' feet to give him thanks for rescuing us and for giving us life in all its fullness.

¹ John McCarthy & Jill Morrell, Some Other Rainbow, (London, Bantam Press, 1993), p 66