

The Touch of Christ

v40 – And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, ‘If you will, you can make me clean.’ v41- Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, ‘I will; be clean.’ v42 – And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. v43 – And Jesus sternly charged him and sent him away at once, v44 – and said to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them.’ v45 – But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places, and people were coming to him from every quarter. (ESV)

Context

After the success of his Capernaum ministry, Jesus now enters Galilee (Mk 1:39). As Jesus’ ministry enters a new phase, likewise so does Mark’s Gospel. This is the start of Jesus’ interactions with the guardians, if you like, of Old Testament tradition. All the different ruling parties, beginning with this passage, are introduced into the narrative. In this section we are introduced to the Temple Priests (Mk 1:44). The Scribes (Mk 2:6) come next and then later the Pharisees (Mk 2:18). This section also opens with two major Old Testament figures as bookends on either side. First Moses (Mk 1:44) and then at the other end King David is mentioned (Mk 2:25). This is no accident. Mark has done this on purpose. In Chapter 1, Jesus came like a whirlwind, a seemingly rogue entity. Yet although clearly something quite unique and new is happening, the question remains what does this mean for the old traditions that are so firmly established within the society into which Jesus enters? Well let’s take a look.

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Again Mark has already shared with us that due to Jesus’ extraordinary ministry in Capernaum his fame has begun to grow (Mk 1:28). This meant that news of a remarkable man, with the ability to heal all types of diseases, must have reached a certain isolated community of Galilean lepers. Hope must have begun to stir in this community, especially in the case of one particular man. This man’s hope and courage must have reached such a climax that he was able to break through the society’s restrictions and throw himself at the feet of Jesus. In Luke’s account, we are told he actually ‘fell on his face and begged him’ (Lk 5:12).

Due to his illness he would have been cut off from the congregation and the ordinances of religion. With a disease such as this he would be forbidden by the law to enter a place if there were people there, and if anyone approached him he would have to cry ‘unclean, unclean!’ as a warning to the people. Can you imagine the humiliation and isolation of this man’s life? Just think that everytime you entered a Tesco or a Waitrose you had to shout from the top of your voices ‘UNCLEAN, UNCLEAN!’ You would feel absolutely worthless. Josephus, who was a famous Jewish historian, who lived not long after Jesus, said, lepers in that time were treated ‘as if they were, in effect, dead men’.

Regardless, this was a desperate man and he took a risk and presumed that Jesus would take pity on him. He must have thought “if he can do it for others, he can do it for me.” He was right, Jesus, moved with pity, stretched out his hand and touched him saying “I will; be clean” (Mk 1:41). Let me tell you, to touch this man had huge societal implications. Here Jesus makes a massive statement. No-one touched lepers for fear of contamination. If you even went near a person like this, let alone touch them, you were in risk of excluding yourself from the rest of the congregation. The best thing

to do would be to go nowhere near them. So if an unclean person, in this case the leper, touched a clean person, that person potentially became unclean and would now have to present themselves before the priests. But something amazing takes place when Christ touches the man, the reverse happens. He is a clean person that touches an unclean person and that person becomes clean (Mk 1:42). Don't overlook the touch of Jesus, he could of healed him anyway he desired, yet he chose to do it this way. Since this man was full of leprosy, we can assume that he had not been touched in a long time. No hugs, no kisses, nothing. Time must have stood still for him, and for everyone else, when Jesus Christ touched him. Immediately he was made clean, full restoration. One second there is a desperate man, a social outcast, full of disease, the next second there is a joyful, healthy member of society.

What about the Old?

So far, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus seems to be acting irrespectively of the current religious traditions and institutions. Yet here in this passage we see Jesus immediately telling the man to offer himself as a proof before the Priests. Why? You see God had already commanded, through Moses, rules and ordinances for how he wanted his people to live, which included in depth instructions even for people with afflictions like leprosy (Lev 13-14). You see there was a list of offerings and sacrifices done by the Priests, on behalf of the diseased, to be offered before a person could be pronounced 'clean'. The Priests themselves never did the healing but rather confirmed a person's 'fitness' to approach the temple. The Priests were faithful guardians of the law and it seems that even they required proof that God still worked amongst his people. Showing yourself to a priest was a religious custom and in this passage we see that not only does Jesus affirm Old Testament tradition he also supersedes it. In fact, he himself said he not come to replace the law but to fulfil it (Matt 5:17-18). The new had arrived, but the old ordinances were still needed, for the time being anyway until Christ has fulfilled his earthly mission (Heb 10:11-14).

No-one knows if this man did eventually make his way to the temple, but what we do know is that he couldn't keep quiet in regards to what Jesus had done for him. Who are we to judge though? Would you be able to keep quiet? However, he does disobey Jesus' charge for silence and consequently Jesus could no longer enter a town openly.

So in summary the passage demonstrates the heart of our Lord and the power that he contains independent of all the religious ordinances and traditions. Yet in spite of Jesus inaugurating a new phase in God's work, he doesn't detach himself from it, in fact in this passage he actually promotes it.

Reflection

What points of reflection can we draw from this passage? Well so much! I offer two. 1. Are you willing? 2. Could there be anything worse than having leprosy?

1. Are You Willing?

Interestingly the passage shows us that the man's question was not if Jesus has the ability to heal him, he knew he did, the question was is Jesus *willing* to heal him? And here is the challenge. If you look around your local community or even further afield im sure that many of have the ability to contribute in some way, whatever that may be. And here comes the challenge. How many of us are actually willing though?

This makes me think back to the story of Father Damien, a catholic priest from Belgium who landed at Honolulu harbour in 1854. As foreign trade began to boom, many traders from all over the world,

imported many extravagant goods. However, to the despair of the Hawaiian people, they also transported all different types of diseases. It is thought that just 10 years before Damien arrived, leprosy had also arrived. At the time the islanders thought the illness was incurable. The situation became so bad that the King of Hawaii passed a law called 'the act to prevent the spread of leprosy' which resulted in over in lepers being shipped off to another island called Molokai, cutting them off from the rest of the civilisation.

Upon hearing the story of these social outcasts, Father Damien told his Bishop to send him there and on May the 10th, 1873, he arrived on the shores of Molokai. On his arrival he was greeted by 800 lepers and in his first address to them he said I will be 'one who will be a Father to you, and who loves you so much that he does not hesitate to become one of you; to live and die with you'. From that moment on he began to teach, paint houses, organise farms, construct roads, build hospitals and churches. He personally dressed residents, dug graves, built coffins, at food by hand with lepers and shared pipes with them. He lived with the lepers as equals, showing them that inspite of what the rest of the world thought of them they were precious in Gods eyes. Now how could he say that? What proof does he have? Well I'm sure that this passage itself spoke to the Damien, aswell as the community, profoundly.

In December 1884, just 11 years after his arrival, whilst preparing to bathe, Damien put his foot in scolding water and felt nothing. There and then he realised that he himself had contracted leprosy. 5 years later he died, aged 49, indeed he had become one with them in both life and death.

Just 6 months after his arrival, Damien wrote a letter to his brother. In it he stated 'I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all for Christ'. What this shows us, is that as an ambassador of Christ, Damien, identified that he had the ability and willingness to reach out and touch these poor castaways for Jesus.

You see in the eyes of Christ no case is too extreme, no matter what society says. Unfortunately, right now, in our very communities there are people still on the outskirts – the name for the disease has just changed. For example the extreme case could now be addiction in whatever form, homelessness and even illness such as depression that pushes people onto the very fringes of society. Unfortunately, majoritively, society places no value on these type of people. Yet Christ does, and we show how much we love him by loving the way he loved others (Matt 25:40, Jhn 13:34). Often I hear people say "I don't know what God wants me to do with my life", I would just say look around. The church is great in theory, we are so careful about doctrine, but we ourselves must begin to reach out and touch those around us, our neighbourhoods, workplaces etc. The problem isn't the need, the problem isn't our ability, the problem is our willingness. So where can you contribute and serve the Lord? Prayfully press on, you will be amazed where the Lord will lead.

2. Could there be anything worse than having leprosy?

This passage may lead us to believe that there nothing worse than leprosy or devastating sickness in the world in which we live. But I need to tell you, there is something much worse. There is a soul-disease engraved into our very nature, the disease of sin. This disease is even deeper seated than leprosy, it infects every part of our nature, our heart, our will, our conscience and our understanding. Its visibility varies from person to person, but let me tell you, it is there, lurking. J.C. Ryle writes, 'It is to the misery and ruin of many souls that they never saw their sins and their need'. However, to know our disease is one step towards cure. There is good news, in that even the very worst of spiritual lepers may yet be cleansed. The good news, the Gospel, is that Jesus Christ on the cross, shed his own blood for our sins that we might be cleansed of sin (1 Jhn 1:7) and through him and in him we have redemption and the forgiveness of our sins according to the riches of his grace

(Eph 1:7). Friend, if you don't know Christ as saviour, you don't know him at all. So I urge you to come to him today, can you humble yourself and say Lord "I know you are willing, make me clean". As in the case of the leper, this is what Jesus can do for you in an instant. All true believers in Christ are former outcasts that have been brought into a new community and it is to the praise of Christ that every one of those believers sings that in spite of my earthly life, addictions or afflictions, "it is well with my soul".