

Mark 1:40-45

Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!”

From the time of her marriage in 1981 to her tragic death in 1997

- Diana, Princess of Wales, was the most photographed woman in the world
- But which of these many pictures had the greatest impact
- Diana became an activist for many causes
- Cancer, leprosy, homelessness and AIDS
- In 1987, she visited the Middlesex Hospital
- and when AIDS was still treated like the plague
- held the hand of an AIDS patient
- the picture was shown all around the world
- shattering stigma, prejudice, misunderstanding and fear
- changing for ever the understanding of care for AIDS sufferers

In 1992, the Methodist Church awarded me a sabbatical

- unsure of how to make the best of this I arranged to go and see four friends of mine
- three in Germany and one in German-speaking Switzerland
- my Swiss friend, Willy, was at that time a Methodist minister just outside of Zürich
- and he arranged a very busy programme for me in my ten days there
- that included a visit to what was then the Methodist Hospital in Zürich
- which was largely staffed by Methodist Deaconesses
- my new friend, Sch. Olga Frischknecht, took me to visit Anchor House
- this was a special project for AIDS patients
- I had not met an AIDS sufferer before – and was a little unsure how to react
- It was made all the more complicated by my not speaking German
- But I remembered the picture of the Princess holding the man’s hand
- Stretched out my hand with the aim of doing the same
- And offering the man in the bed my battered selection of photographs
- Of Cornwall, where I was living at the time, and the children
- “Schön, schön” he said, “Beautiful, lovely”
- It is a lasting memory

Our consecutive reading of Mark’s gospel brings us to Jesus’ encounter with a leper

- Leprosy is a medical condition, also known as Hansen’s disease
- Taking its name from a Norwegian doctor
- Though curable, it is still highly prevalent in Asia, South America and Africa
- We don’t know whether this man in the Bible had Hansen’s disease
- As the word translated ‘leprosy’ covered a wide variety of serious skin diseases
- But what we do know is that it caused him much suffering
- Both social and physical

In Bible times, anyone who had suspected signs of leprosy was taken to a priest

- The priest would determine whether the sufferer had leprosy
- And only the priest could say whether the disease had been cleansed
- The Israelites believed that only God could heal from leprosy

Some of you might recall the story of Naaman, from the Old Testament (2 Kings 5)

- Naaman was the commander of the army of the king of Aram
- He was a valiant soldier but he had leprosy
- A young Israelite slave girl served in his household
- And told Naaman's wife that her master should go to the prophet Elisha in Samaria
- With letters and gifts from the king of Aram
- Naaman went not to the prophet but to the king of Israel

The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: "With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!"

(2 Kings 5:6-7)

The king of Israel believed that curing leprosy was something only God could do

- Eventually, Naaman made his way to Elisha's house
- And, reluctantly, followed the order to bathe in the River Jordan seven times
- Cleansed from his leprosy, Naaman testified:
- "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel"

In Bible times lepers were governed by strict rules

- as long as they had the infection they were classed as unclean
- and required to live alone, away from the other people (Lev 13:45-46)
- if they came near to others they had to cry out "Unclean! Unclean!"
- almost everyone would have classified a leper as a sinner
- In effect, a leper was a living corpse and a cure was like raising the dead

Instead of keeping his distance from Jesus, as the ceremonial law of Israel demanded

- The leper came directly to Jesus, fell down on his knees to make his plea
- He had no doubt that Jesus could heal him
- He only wondered whether Jesus was willing

The world in which we live today is very different from the world of the New Testament

- The success of modern medicine stands alongside any claim to divine healing
- While liberal theology concludes that such belief in such supernatural happenings
- Is culturally conditioned by the primitive mindset of the Biblical writers
- And did not happen – other people enthusiastically tell me of all kinds of healings
- As is often the case, I find myself taking the middle ground
- And probably being shot at by both sides
- I believe that God still intervenes to effect supernatural healing today
- But I think that far from it being sensational – it is more often than not
- Simply through the faithful prayers of his people
- Now when a healing meeting with attendant razzmatazz is advertised
- It sounds more exciting than prayer meeting – but there is no reason why it should

Nevertheless, what is the greatest miracle that God is accomplishing in the world today?

- Is it that someone who has died is raised from the dead?
- It might be – I can neither affirm or deny it because it is outside my experience
- But which is really the greater miracle
- That a person who has died physically is restored to life
- Or that a person who is spiritually dead passes from death to life
- The greatest miracle in the church today is when a person is born anew
- If people are looking for sensational miracles let's look no further than this one
- Every time a sinner is converted it is a miracle
- Calling sinners to repentance was Jesus' mission – it must be our mission too

The leper had no doubt that Jesus could heal him

- He only wondered if Jesus would be willing to heal him
- Such healing would put Jesus on a collision course with the religious people
- After all, only God could cleanse lepers
- And if, as many would have thought at the time, leprosy was a punishment for sin (which, incidentally, I don't believe it is)
- then Jesus is in a doubly difficult position
- because healing the man of leprosy appears to be assuming the role of God
- and cleansing him from leprosy is like forgiving him and cleansing him from sin

From Jesus' reaction we see what I call:

I THE TENDERNESS OF JESUS

Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"

There is a slight difficulty in the phrase 'filled with compassion'

- it might be better translated 'being angered'
- but I think the end-product is much the same
- Jesus is compassionate with the man but angry at his situation

If others classified the leper as a sinner, who must appeal for mercy to be healed

- Jesus never responded to those who came to him with judgment
- But with kindness and mercy – it is a lesson that is difficult to learn

But there is a moral to the story for anyone who is asking the question

- If I come to Jesus for mercy and forgiveness
- What kind of response can I expect?
- And here is the answer, one of compassion, one of mercy
- The tenderness of Jesus

Now perhaps you are a person who is having some mental or spiritual battle

- There are things in your life that are unresolved
- Maybe you feel something of an outsider
- You don't call out "Unclean! Unclean" but that is how you feel
- You want to be forgiven, you want to be cleansed – but you don't know what to do

I think it would be a wonderful thing to study the prayers of Jesus in the Bible

- Perhaps I could encourage you to do that
- The last prayer of Jesus before he died was
- ‘Father into my hands I commend my spirit’
- It was the evening prayer of a Jewish child

I don’t know about you, but when I am spiritually wrung out, it’s hard to know what to pray

- Just at the time we feel we should be praying we don’t know what to say
- As a child, certainly before I was seven years old
- In the Primary Department at Sunday School, I learned this prayer

Jesus, tender Shepherd hear me,
Bless thy little lamb tonight.
Through the darkness, be thou near me
Keep me safe ‘till morning light.

All this day thy hand hath led me
And I thank thee for thy care.
Thou hast clothed me, warmed me, fed me;
Listen to my evening prayer.

Let my sins be all forgiven.
Bless the friends I love so well.
Take me, when I die, to heaven,
Happy there with thee to dwell.

It’s not the most sophisticated prayer ever prayed – but it’s enough

- For it simply affirms the tenderness and forgiveness of Jesus

The tenderness of Jesus is also expressed in:

II THE TOUCH OF JESUS

Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!”

It is fair to say that Jesus could have healed the leper simply by his word of command

- And yet, to express his compassion, he reached out and touched the leper
- The first remarkable thing about this is that God took human flesh to do this
- He became fully human so that he might cleanse us from our sins
- For without God coming in flesh, in person, in Jesus
- He could not have died on the cross for us
- In a very real sense, this is a personal encounter with Jesus

Sunday by Sunday people are going to services – of course, I am all in favour of that

- But what we need is a personal encounter with Jesus
- To know both his tenderness and his touch
- Probably for the first time in ages, another clean human has touched the leper

And yet it is all more fantastic than that

- Another clean human has touched the leper
- But the touch is the touch of the hand of God
- Interestingly enough, after he had died and had risen to life again
- Jesus' followers found it all very hard to take in
- But when he appeared to them he said:

Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.

(Luke 24:39)

To the best of my knowledge, I have never met a person suffering from leprosy

- But I am sure that I have met many people, who would like to know God's touch
- A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees
- If you are willing, you can make me clean
- Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.
- Don't you sometimes think that it is easier to believe in the power of God
- Than it is to believe in the mercy of God?
- But in this very story we see the tenderness of Jesus
- We see the touch of Jesus – a touch of healing, a touch of forgiveness
- Jesus never condemns the afflicted

But we see in the story also:

III THE TOUGHNESS OF JESUS

Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning:

“See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.”

(Mark 1:44)

It is not immediately obvious why Jesus commanded the leper not to tell anyone

- German New Testament scholar, Wilhelm Wrede (1859-1906)
- Put forward his famous Messianic Secret Theory
- Calling into question the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ
- Personally, I think that there are other adequate explanations

The main mission of Jesus was not miracles but preaching the good news of the kingdom

- Jesus prefers to keep the news of his miracles quiet
- To give him more time to preach the word
- Jesus does not trust a faith based on spectacles
- Whenever someone disobeys the command to be quiet
- The next scene begins by mentioning the crush of the crowds
- Jesus did not want to gain the reputation of being just another miracle-worker
- The crowds that gather for the healings will soon disperse
- When the way of suffering and the cross is revealed

Jesus told the cleansed leper to do as the law commanded

- Show himself to the priest so that he could be formally pronounced cleansed
- I think that there is a subtle lesson for us in this
- Some years ago, a lady in one of my congregations
- Largely influenced by some other earnest members of her house group
- Stopped taking prescribed medication as a gesture of faith
- Suffered an illness and was never quite the same again, for the rest of her life
- If you feel that you have been healed – go to the doctor, let him/her decide
- The toughness of Jesus reminds us of our responsibility in the world

In this passage we see:

I THE TENDERNESS OF JESUS

He does not turn away anyone who comes to him

II THE TOUCH OF JESUS

There is a salutary lesson in all of this for today's church

- Those of us who bear the name of Christ
- Need to minister in the name of the Lord Jesus to today's untouchables
- But before we can be of much use to him we need first to be touched ourselves

III THE TOUGHNESS OF JESUS

It is important to keep our feet on the ground, even if our head disappears into the clouds

- To do what Jesus commands us

Now we could finish there – but I am going to take a further minute or two to consider

- Our approach to others and our feelings about ourselves
- What is it about others that might make us feel that they are lepers?
- Are there other people whom we need to treat differently?
- And what is it about us that might make us feel like lepers – untouchable?

To give ourselves a tangible opportunity to respond to the Word of God today

- Jesus who does not turn anyone who comes to him, therefore:
- I am going to invite you to come forward – for at least three things
- To pray for forgiveness
- To know the touch of God in your life
- Or to ask God to allow your hands to be used for him – in reaching out to others