

Attacking the Purity System: Jesus and the leper (Mark 1: 35-45)

A Preaching Tour in Galilee

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' ³⁸He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Jesus Cleanses a Leper

40 A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.' ⁴¹Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' ⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.' ⁴⁵But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Commentary

The healing narratives: Good News and Bad News

The healing narratives plot two things for us: the effect of the presence of the Kingdom as Good News among the poor and marginalized communities of the Galilee that results in Jesus' *popularity*, and as Bad News for the political and religious elites in Jerusalem, resulting in *developing opposition* to Jesus, provoked by his *authority*.

Just as the exorcisms are an attack on the Strong Man (cf Mark 3: 20-30), the healings are an attack on the *Purity System* that made illness a reason for exclusion from the wider community. This exclusion is the "suffering within suffering", so that the constant emphasis in the healing stories is on *restoration*.

The Purity System and the threat of contamination (Mark 1: 40-42)

Jesus touches a leper and "makes him clean", rather than "healing" him. The difference is important. Touching is all about contamination and contagion, and the central role this plays in the Purity System of Jesus' day.

According to the priests, scribes and Pharisees, holiness equals cleanliness. The Temple was built on this principle: at its centre was the Holy of Holies – the only place where it was safe for Yahweh, the Holy God, to be. It was protected by a

rigorous system of purity, because holiness is threatened by contamination. Radiating outwards were the different courts; the further away from the centre you were, the less stringent were the purity rules.

Leprosy was a contamination, as were bleeding women. Sufferers were excluded from the synagogue and community until they were better (“clean”). Once they recovered, they had to be examined by the priest and declared clean again.

Challenging the Purity System (Mark 1: 40-42)

Read Leviticus 13-14. Two whole chapters in the book, devoted to the subject of leprosy! Then look more closely at the elements in the story:

The leper dares to approach Jesus, instead of remaining at a distance and calling out a warning: “Unclean!” You can picture how easily and effectively a leper got through the crowd to within Jesus’ reach, can’t you? They’d have parted like the Red Sea! Yet Jesus stands his ground.

“If you choose, you can make me clean!” If you *choose*, or if you *dare*? Is this first and foremost an appeal to Jesus’ compassion, or is this a case of the leper seeing clearly who Jesus is – the one who overthrows the Purity System? To be *healed* and to be *cleansed* are two different things: only a priest could declare a leper clean. “Being clean” was a pronouncement, not a condition or disease.

Jesus doesn’t only heal, he makes (declares?) the leper clean! Is Jesus assuming the priestly role, thereby challenging the hegemony of the priests and scribes?

Jesus’ response is dictated by compassion. The Greek word means that Jesus was “twisted up in his guts with suffering empathy and ached to do something about it!” Jesus’ power is defined by compassion. This is the power of God. It is what motivates the healing of the leper, as indeed it underlies the whole movement of God towards us in Jesus.

Jesus touches the leper. You don’t do that! Apart from being made ritually unclean (which was more of a bother than a serious problem), it was suspected that leprosy was transmitted by touch. It was a deadly and highly contagious disease. It was the job of the priest to examine a leper carefully to establish whether the disease was in the active phase of contagion. Touching a leper was therefore associated with huge personal risk. Jesus touching the leper was akin to the images in the 1980s of Princess Diana hugging the AIDS sufferers.

Look at the flow of contagion: instead of Jesus being made ill, the leper is made well.

The attack on the Purity System (Mark 1: 43-45)

It is one thing to say that Jesus’ healing provokes the hostile reaction of the purity system, and another to say that this is a deliberate attack on the system. Look at the elements of *anger* in the story.

Suppose for a moment that the context of the story is one in which the leper has been to the priests to be declared clean (presumably the disease is not in its contagious phase) and that the priest has refused his petition (hence the sense of “if you *dare* you can make me clean”). Jesus both heals – the leprosy leaves completely so there is no doubt that he is “clean” and not even the priest could argue - and *declares* him clean. “Then Jesus, *snorting with indignation*, sent him away at once”.

Jesus sends him away to the priests, to make the due payment for a clean bill of health. In other words, Jesus heals the leper, declares him clean and sends him to the priests as an act of confrontation: “Look! You would not declare him clean, so I have removed all trace of the disease. Whether you declare him clean or not, I have already done so, and he *is* clean. And now you will make him pay you for an offering! This is indeed an offering to God – but as witness against you!”

Yet Jesus’ strategy backfires. The man aborts his mission, goes public, and Jesus is forced into hiding – not only because of his popularity, but because he is now a marked man: he has touched a leper. If this is so, we have an interesting reversal: Jesus now shares, in some sense, the ostracism from mainstream community life that the leper originally suffered, because of his *compassion*! Healing provokes conflict and opposition and leads to Jesus sharing increasingly the ostracism of those with whom he is in solidarity.

For reflection:

1. In what ways and to what extent do we have our own “Purity System” when it comes to God? Is sin primarily about the “dirty stuff “ we do (especially sexual stuff), or is it more about the systems of exclusion and victimisation that we operate? What system do we use for ranking sin in order of seriousness? What are the things that break society most seriously? How and what do we preach about these things?
2. The church has a terrible history of exclusion: women, people of colour, slavery, gay people, immigrants, issues of class. How would that history be different if we had operated on Jesus’ principle of compassion? In what ways does your church mirror Jesus’ compassionate inclusion? In what ways does it challenge and offend people who want to set boundaries that keep people out? Are you prepared to take sides with excluded people – to face opposition and criticism?
3. What do you hear Jesus calling or challenging you to do? What do you hear Jesus calling or challenging your church to do?

Resources

Images/multimedia

<http://www.textweek.com/art/healing.htm>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7oJ3SDmVTA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncH6DmCPNpQ> (find the relevant section)

Children

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhqWrggWCg8>

Hymns & prayers

<http://lectionarypoems.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/hymn-for-february-1-2015-based-on-mark.html>

<http://www.newhymn.com/060GiftOfHisTouch.htm>

<http://www.lca.org.au/worship/cowadmin/?p=2238>

<http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocB/BEIPHANY6.htm>

<http://lectionarysong.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/songs-and-hymns-for-epiphany-6b.html>

<https://revgalblogpals.org/2012/02/12/prayer-for-sunday-epiphany-6b/>

Opening words:

O God, who created mountains out of nothing
And called creation into being by the power of your Word,
We are here to be recreated in Christ's image.

O Christ, who came to seek out and embrace the lost, the despised, the forgotten,
And to announce liberty to the oppressed,
***We are here to be forgiven for what we cannot undo
And freed from all that binds us.***

O Holy Spirit, who comes like fire to set us aflame
And like a dove to dwell within us,
We are here to be filled with the Life of God.

Come, all you who are hungry within your souls. Jesus is the Bread of Life!
Feed us, Lord, for we are hungry, and only the Bread that you give satisfies.
Come, all you who are thirsty within your souls. Jesus is the Water of Life!

Fill us, Lord, for our souls thirst for the Living God.

Come, you who ache for a just world and life for all. Jesus is the King of Peace!

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Come, all you who yearn to be welcomed and forgiven. Jesus invites you with open arms!

We come to be held, healed and liberated. We come to worship in your name.

Hymn

Lord's Prayer (with responses)

Our Father in heaven

Come and meet with your children.

Hallowed be your name.

You alone are worthy of our praise and worship.

Your Kingdom come; your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Open our eyes and hearts to your world!

Give us today our daily bread

Nourish our faith as you have nourished our bodies with good things.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

Renew us. Restore us. Release us as we release those who have hurt us.

Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil

Lead us to your green pastures and still waters. Restore our souls.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen.

(Lawrence Moore)