

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46; Psalm 32 (31); 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1; Mark 1:40-45

Moved with pity, Jesus said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!”

Mark 1:40 A leper came to Jesus begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” 41 Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” 42 Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. 43 After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, 44 saying 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.” 45 But 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.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

There are two stories here. The first is a fairly straightforward miracle story, showing the usual steps. The second deals with the reaction to the miracle story and it needs a special comment (see below).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The term “leprosy” refers to a variety of conditions, characterised by chronic discolouration of surfaces, including human skin and the walls of houses. There are detailed regulations about this in Leviticus 13-14, with narrative examples in 2 Kings 5 (Namaan) and 2 Chronicles 26 (Uzziah). Within the culture, persons infected were regarded as ritually impure and were to be exiles from the community (Lev 13:44-46). Touching and ministering to lepers would be a shock at the period.

“But if there is on the bald head or the bald forehead a reddish-white diseased spot, it is a leprosy disease breaking out on his bald head or his bald forehead. The priest shall examine him; if the dis-



Moved with pity, He stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, “Be clean.” Mark 1:41

eased swelling is reddish-white on his bald head or on his bald forehead, which resembles a leprosy disease in the skin of the body, he is leprosy, he is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean; the disease is on his head. The person who has the leprosy disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (Leviticus 13:42-46)

In the patristic period, these texts were read as allegories for the exclusion of the sinner from the community (the original excommunication). Correspondingly, the restoration of the patient was taken to refer to absolution from sin and restoration to the community of the faithful.

KIND OF WRITING

The first story is an anecdote or typical story of Jesus. The stages of a miracle

Thought for the day

To us, leprosy or any serious skin condition is a medical and perhaps a cosmetic issue. In Jesus’ day, by contrast, such things entailed social exclusion and sufferer became literally untouchable. Hence the shock in the Gospel: he touched him. Before congratulating ourselves for not being so “primitive,” it might not be any harm to ask who are the marginalised and excluded in our own time and culture? The categories are wide: socio-economic groups, ethnicity, orientation, religion. Whom do I never encounter?

Prayer

Where charity and love prevail, there God is ever found; Brought here together by Christ’s love, by love are we thus bound.

No race or creed can love exclude, if honoured be God’s name; our common life embraces all whose Father is the same.

Taken from *Where charity and love prevail*

account are present: condition, encounter, request, gesture and word, healing, proof.

The second story needs to be read at two levels. Historically, Jesus may very well have been cautious about his reputation and in particular about being identified as the messiah. However, Mark has raised this caution to a new level in his Gospel, giving rise to the scholarly hypothesis of the “Messianic Secret.”

According to this hypothesis, Mark tried to account for Jewish non-recognition of Jesus as Messiah as actually God’s plan, so that when God’s first chosen people would fail to receive Jesus, his offer of salvation might be extended to those “outside”, that is, the Gentiles. This may seem very artificial at first glance. However, Mark does reflect both Jesus’ own caution and what actually happened, as the gospel spread among non-Jews from very early on. The hypothesis offers considerable hope: God takes the negative of the “no” of Israel and turns it into

the positive of the “yes” of the Gentiles. Perhaps the best comment on all this is Romans 9-11 (not easy to read but very helpful). There is one more level in Mark: this Gospel writer portrays the effect of Jesus as a kind of wildfire.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Lepers: Matt 8:2; 10:8; 11:5; 26:6; Mark 1:40; 14:3; Luke 4:27; 7:22; 17:12.

Moved with pity: this is a very important expression. Here are the instances in the Mark (different English expressions translate the same Greek word).

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” (Mark 1:41) As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had *compassion* for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. (Mark 6:34) “I have *compassion* for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. (Mark 8:2) It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, *have pity* on us and help us.” (Mark 9:22)

Sternly warning: In Mark, Jesus does warn people not to speak. However, the word used here is quite unusual and calls for a special translation. In Greek, the root meaning is to snort (!), with the extended sense of to be angry at or to warn very sternly. The only other occurrence in Mark is 14:5.

Sent away: Again, the Greek is bit stronger. *Eksballō*, lit. to throw out, means to force to leave or to send away in a strong sense. Earlier, the Spirit “threw” Jesus out into the desert (same word in Greek).

In the story as Mark has it, we note verbs denoting strong emotion: anger/compassion, angry, dismiss. In a pre-Markan form, the story may have portrayed Jesus’ angry (see below), not at the man, but at the forces of evil holding him captive.

ST PAUL

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their un-

belief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree. (Romans 11:17-24)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 40 “Kneeling” – also done by the young man in 10:17, but with very different results. The man’s direct petition implies both great need and great faith.

Verse 41 The first word in this verse *splangchnistheis*, translated as “moved with pity”, is key word in the NT (see above). It is used only of God in the parables or of Jesus in the narratives: Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22; Luke 7:13; 10:33; 15:20. It illustrates a characteristic of Jesus and a very important aspect of his proclamation of the Kingdom. The literally meaning is to be disturbed almost physically, “in your guts”, a kind of spontaneous, maternal compassion.

A very few manuscripts give as an alternative “he was angry” which just might be the earlier tradition. It is easier to imagine a scribe changing anger to pity than the other way around (the *lectio difficilior*). Both Matthew and Luke avoid this difficulty by simply omitting the reaction of Jesus.

Verse 42 “Immediately” is typical of Mark. The cure is swiftly recounted.

Verse 43 For sternly warning and the “secret”, see above.

Verse 44 The priest was responsible for making the judgement that the disease was over and the person could be readmitted to the community. “To them” may mean to the priests only or, perhaps, to “the Jews”. Mark was written at the time when the break with the synagogue was taking place or was just about to. Notice that the healed man is disobedient twice: he does not go to the priest and he does not keep silent.

Verse 45 It would naturally be a bit hard to “say nothing to anyone”, because the excluded person could now resume a normal life. But this man goes much further: he proclaims (using the NT technical term for effective proclamation, *kerygma*) freely and spreads the “word” (using the NT shorthand term for the Gospel about Jesus, reflecting the later church context of writing (Mark 2:2; 4:14-20, 33; Acts 6:4; Gal 6:6; Col 4:3). The effect on Jesus is a pattern in Mark: he seeks seclusion, but the people seek him in his hide-away.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus’ compassion for people suffering was an outstanding characteristic of his ministry. We see the healing power of God at work through him. Recall times when the compassion of others has had a healing effect on you. Remember also when your compassion towards someone in trouble brought them hope, healing or strength.

2. “If you choose, you can make me clean”. Our choice is a key factor in how we affect others. We cannot choose to have no impact on the people in our lives. Even a choice to do nothing has an effect. When have you been particularly aware of the importance of your choice to be a positive influence on another?

3. The leper was not just cured from a physical disease, he was also readmitted to contact with the community. Perhaps you recall people who were once ostracised being brought back into family or community. Who was the Jesus person who helped this healing to take place?

4. The joy of the leper on being healed was such that he could not keep the good news to himself. Bring to mind occasions when you were so filled with good news that you could not keep it to yourself?

PRAYER

We come before you, O God, confident in Christ’s victory over sickness and death.

Heal us again from sin, which divides us, and from prejudice, which isolates us. Bring to wholeness of life through the pardon you grant your people.

This prayer we make through your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

1 Cor 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. 32 Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, 33 just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved.

1 Cor 11:1 Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

In any community or group, some people can be more advanced than others and a mature understanding can lead to a greater freedom and flexibility. On the other hand, the exercise of such freedom can be very disturbing to those who have not reached that level, so to speak. This is true today in the Christian community. It was also true in the early communities of Paul. Romans 14 would be a good example of the phenomenon, as indeed is 1 Corinthians 10. Paul's fundamental principle is that love is more important than knowledge, in the sense that it is better to love "the weak" than to cause them to stumble by flaunting your freedom. See below under Related Passages. It is not without its difficulties, because it does give considerable "power" to the less grown-up in the faith. Naturally, we do not want a two-tier Christianity!

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The concrete issue which gives rise to this debate is the availability of meat sacrificed to idols. At the meat market in Corinth (the *macellum*), almost all available meat came from one or other temple or sacrifice. The practical alternative would have been to confine yourself to vegetables—as option reflected in Romans 14:2, 21.

Paul himself is robust: there is no such thing as these gods and demons, so you can eat what you like. Nevertheless, he thinks it good to forego this right for the sake of the delicate consciences of "the weak." At home, one could choose what

to eat. If you are invited to a dinner, what then? And what about the work guilds, all of which were associated with temple meals. It may all seem remote to us but it was not a simple matter.

It also raises two questions which are current today. (1) How much compromise is possible with the surrounding cultural values, which can be very different from Christian principles? (2) How to deal with diversity and freedom within the Christian polity itself?

In the context of Corinth, Paul gives a three-fold response: (i) love is more important than knowledge; (ii) you can eat what you like; (iii) temple meals—a major compromise with the culture—are forbidden. In chapter 9, Paul illustrates from his own practice the sensitive exercise of freedom—well worth a read.

KIND OF WRITING

From chapter 7 onwards, Paul is responding to the letter from the Corinthians, raising a series of issues. Within that, a whole section is devoted to food offered to idols: 8:1-11:1, as follows:

- 8:1-13 "Knowledge" v. love.
- 9:1-26 The rights of an apostle
- 10:1-22 Lessons from Israel's history
- 10:23-11:1 For the glory of God

The wider context in the letter requires us to read from 10:23 onwards, which is really a summing up of the argument.

RELATED PASSAGES

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or

on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. (1 Corinthians 8:1-7)

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." (Romans 15:1-3)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 32 Paul responds to a Corinthian slogan, "all things are lawful for me" from 1 Cor 10:23. God's glory is more important than my rights.

Verses 33-34 Not giving offence is quite strong; don't put a barrier in the way of a believer. Paul holds himself up as an example. This he does frequently not because he is boastful but because he wants to show them it can be done!

Verse 1 I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me (1 Corinthians 4:16; also: Gal 4:12; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6). The specific practical imitation he has in view is to be found in 1 Cor 9:20-22.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Reflect on your own experience of living in a culture with a different set of values. When does tolerance become timidity?
2. Foregoing legitimate freedoms is certainly not part of the culture today... what has your experience been?
3. A real test for us all would be: in this decision or action or preference, whose glory and I seeking?

PRAYER

God of grace, you call us to freedom and to love. Show us how we can be both loving and free, for the building up of our neighbour and for your greater glory.

We make our prayer through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.



He shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.”

Lev. 13:1 The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 2 When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests.

43 The priest shall examine him; if the diseased swelling is reddish-white on his bald head or on his bald forehead, which resembles a leprous disease in the skin of the body, 44 he is leprous, he is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean; the disease is on his head.

45 The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” 46 He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Probably most of us would not choose this medical-legal passage for *lectio* and prayer! Nevertheless, it does provide essential background reading for the Gospel today and is also interesting on its own account. It should be said at the very start that the traditional translation “leprosy” (retained in many versions) is, with almost 100% certainty, wrong, because Hanson’s Disease was unknown in the Middle East in the biblical period. In any case, the problem has not to do with health but with ritual purity or right order.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The reading is from the book of Leviticus, which is the central writing of the Pentateuch. From a faith point of view too, Leviticus is at the heart of Israel’s stay on Mt Sinai (Ex 19:1-Num 10:10). As a result, it is much more significant than would be immediately apparent to a twenty-first century reader.

Maintaining holiness is a key purpose of Leviticus, as these texts show: For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy. (Lev 11:45; cf. 19:2; 20:26)

Lev 20:26 gives an important clue. To be “holy” (*sanctus*) means to be set apart (cf.

“sanction” and “sanctuary”). The writers of Leviticus wish to keep the proper order or place of things in all creation, especially the pure and the impure. “Pure” and “impure” are not moral or even less medical concepts; instead they refer to a kind of sacred ontology. The basis for the division of everything created into pure and impure, sacred and profane, (cf. *fanum* and *profanum*) is laid already in Genesis 1, when God creates by separating light from darkness, land from water and so forth.

In this worldview, whatever is “irregular” is somehow out of place and a boundary has been breached. What is irregular is impure (“ontologically”) and, consequently, contagious. As a result, to save the community as a whole, a barrier needs to be erected and the impure person is ostracised for a time.

The complaint itself is not precisely medical, as is apparent from the provision for treatment of the same symptoms on fabrics and on the walls of house (mildew?). These marks are somehow seen to be the harbinger of decay and death and the prescribed gestures are actually proper to mourning.

Leviticus 1-7 Sacrifice
Lev 8-10 Worship
Lev 11-16 Purity and purifications
Lev 17-27 The Holiness Code

KIND OF WRITING

This text is properly a legal text, which provides actions and rituals for maintaining free from contagion the holiness of the people. The whole section looks like this:

Lev 13:1-46 Humans suffering from *tzara’at*
Lev 13:47-59 Fabrics showing signs of *tzara’at*
Lev 14:1-32 Rituals of purification and re-integration
Lev 14:33-53 Houses showing signs of *tzara’at*.

The complex rituals of re-integration (see days 1, 7 and 8) are a rite of passage, restoring the person to the community.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The whole section on so-called “leprosy”

(*tzara’at* in Hebrew) goes from 13:1-14:57. The most well known story of the complaint is in 2 Kings 5:8-14.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 To Moses and Aaron because it is the role of the priest to certify the cure. Cf. 11:1.

Verse 2 Several translations propose “a shiny mark” to translate what is intended. Alone such a mark would not suffice to identify the irregularity, so other symptoms are explored in the next verse.

Verse 43 Normal baldness is not the same as *tzara’at*; rather a combination with other conditions is required. Just as well!!

Verse 44 Not blaming him, just successfully diagnosing it.

Verse 45 The first three instructions are signs of mourning (cf. Ez 24:17, 20), because the disease is associated with decay and death.

Verse 46 Probably everything the infected person comes in contact with is thereby rendered impure.

Verse 47 The camp...probably a reference to the wilderness period or perhaps reflecting later use, meaning outside the city walls. Cf. 2 Kings 7:3. Only people suffering from *tzara’at* are obliged to leave the community. I.e. other categories of impurity do not impose exclusions.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Perhaps a way into this rather challenging text could be to go back to some moment in your own life when you were excluded, perhaps from a group or a relationship. How did you feel? Were you welcomed back? What “processes” facilitated your return?

2. The passage could be read also in patristic mode: when has actual sin made you feel apart from the community and what journey of forgiveness brought you back?

PRAYER

Holy God, it is your wish that we should be holy as you are holy. We are your children now: may we purify the intentions of our heart so that when you are revealed we shall be like you so that we may see you are you really are.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-46; Psalm 32 (31); 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1; Mark 1:40-45

READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading from Leviticus helps us understand the phenomenon of exclusion, the shock of touching such a person and the need still to have the cure certified so that the patient may be welcomed back into the community.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

In the patristic tradition, such purity regulations in the Bible were understood in the light of the confessional practice of the time. The leprosy was read metaphorically for sin and the exclusion from the community was seen as excommunication. Something of this reading seems to be behind the choice of Psalm 32 (31), which deals directly with forgiveness of sins.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Leviticus 13:1-2, 44-6

The gospel tells the story of the healing of a man with a skin complaint (not our “leprosy”). Such conditions were viewed very differently in ancient times, as we here in this reading from the book of Leviticus. The prescribed gestures are actually signs of mourning, because the person was regarded as “dead” to the community.

Second reading

Corinthians 10:31-11:1

Like our own times, early Christian communities experienced rivalry, based on different traditions and practices, in this case Jew versus Gentile. Paul’s advice is still good today: try to be helpful to everyone at all time. Sounds easy!

Gospel

Mark 1:40-45

We might miss the shock factor in this reading: Jesus touches someone regarded as literally “untouchable”, an outcast from society. There is something here for the church of today, which tends to fall back into habits of exclusion, contrary to the teaching and practice of Jesus.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 16 February

Genesis 4:1-15, 25

Sibling rivalry is present through the book of Genesis, seen in the tension between a whole series of brothers. There is more at stake: the rivalry between the settled farmer (Cain) and the nomadic shepherd (Abel). There is more: a lesson in not imposing too great a punishment.

Tuesday 17 February

Genesis 6:5-8, 7:1-5, 10

The story of Noah’s ark begins today. However, tomorrow is Ash Wednesday, so we hear just the beginning. Perhaps as a lead-in to Lent, we might not God’s heartfelt disappointment at human wrong-doing: *and his heart grieved.*

Ash Wednesday 18 February

Joel 2:12-18

Conversion was the call of Jesus, conversion of heart and life. With its responsorial Psalm, this reading is a classical call to renewal. May we hear these words this Lent.

Thursday 19 February

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Towards the close of Deuteronomy, a final summons to chose life, not death. Choosing life entails further choices, of course.

Friday 20 February

Isaiah 58:1-9

What has religion to do with politics or fasting to due with justice? In case we go down the route of mere devotionism, Isaiah in full prophetic mode puts us right.

Saturday 21 February

Isaiah 58:9-14

This reading continues yesterday’s in no uncertain terms. We are reminded of the blistering words of Amos: *I hate, I scorn your festivals, I take no pleasure in your solemn assemblies, your oblations, I do not accept them and I do not look at your communion sacrifices of fat cattle. Spare me the din of your*

chanting, let me hear none of your strumming on lyres, let justice flow like water, and uprightness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:21-24)

REFLECTIONS

“*Rend your hearts and not your garments*” (Joel 2:13). With these penetrating words of the Prophet Joel, the liturgy today introduces us into Lent, pointing to conversion of heart as the chief characteristic of this season of grace. The prophetic appeal challenges all of us without exception, and it reminds us that conversion is not to be reduced to outward forms or to vague intentions, but engages and transforms one’s entire existence beginning from the centre of the person, from the conscience. We are invited to embark upon a journey on which, by defying routine, we strive to open our eyes and ears, but especially to open our hearts, in order to go beyond our own “backyard”.

Opening oneself to God and to the brethren. We know that this increasingly artificial world would have us live in a culture of “doing”, of the “useful”, where we exclude God from our horizon without realising it. But we also exclude the horizon itself! Lent beacons us to “rouse ourselves”, to remind ourselves that we are creatures, simply put, that we are not God. In the little daily scene, as I look at some of the power struggles to occupy spaces, I think: these people are playing God the Creator. They still have not realised that they are not God.

And we also risk closing ourselves off to others and forgetting them. But only when the difficulties and suffering of others confront and question us may we begin our journey of conversion towards Easter. It is an itinerary which involves the Cross and self-denial. Today’s Gospel indicates the elements of this spiritual journey: prayer, fasting and almsgiving (cf. Mt 6:1-6; 16-18). All three exclude the need for appearances: what counts is not appearances; the value of life does not depend on the approval of others or on success, but on what we have inside us.

Pope Francis,
Ash Wednesday 2014