

Wednesday 13th May 2020 – reading and reflection

Collect – 5th Sunday of Easter

Almighty God,
who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ
have overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life:
grant that, as by your grace going before us
you put into our minds good desires,
so by your continual help
we may bring them to good effect;
through Jesus Christ our risen Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Luke 5.12-26

Jesus Heals a Man With Leprosy

While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” And immediately the leprosy left him.

Then Jesus ordered him, “Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.”

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. ¹⁶ But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

Jesus Forgives and Heals a Paralyzed Man

One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven.”

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, “Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, “We have seen remarkable things today.”

Reflection

It sometimes feels that the healing stories of Jesus are just seen as a dime a dozen, that we overlook their profound meaning and just focus on the product of the act itself – the healing. However, we should really look deeper, because they all reveal something key to who Jesus is and how broad and generous God’s kingdom actually is. And in our reading today, the two healing episodes here, are incidents that happen in situations of exclusion and marginalization.

In the first, the man with leprosy has nobody to present his case to Jesus because he is isolated from the mainstream society. He is treated as an outcast. Unclean because of his illness and therefore shunned. Regulations that isolated him because they were necessary to prevent the spread of disease. Sound familiar? In his desperation and exclusion, the man therefore approaches the Lord himself and, in his reticence, does so with ‘his face to the ground’. And what does Jesus do? It is a simple but profound action. He stretches out his hand and *touches* him. Almost certainly nobody had touched this man for a very long time. His body riddled with disease, quite literally eating away at him, and now Jesus touches him. We can only imagine the sense of awe and joy that this brought to the leper. In theory, this action should have made Jesus both ceremonially unclean and liable to contract the disease. But, as with so many of his healings, it worked the other way around. His cleanness, his healing power, his love and grace ‘infected’ the man so to speak.

By contrast, the man in the second episode is well supplied with supportive and determined friends, who insist on bringing him to Jesus despite all obstacles. For Luke the barrier standing in the way of his access to the Lord is not the building itself (the physical problems are overcome by a rather simple, ingenious method of breaking through its roof!) but the obstructive attitude of the members of the crowd within it. Luke emphasises that Jesus was powerful, and that it was God’s power at work in him. This is of course why people came in such numbers. Jesus seeing their resourcefulness as a sign that they really believed God was at work, forgave the man’s sins first and foremost. An action that in many ways is more important than healing. The healing is a result of a connection between faith and the power of God overcoming all obstacles.

Contemporary theories of disability adopt what is called the social model, explaining that disability is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by someone’s impairment. This can be seen at work in both the isolation of the first man and the obstruction of the second.

The healings Jesus brings to both are remarkable in themselves but the deeper challenge he conveys is that of a different ordering of society announced in the coming of the kingdom. The word for 'remarkable things' in the last line it is better translated as 'extraordinary'. In the Greek it's *paradoxa*, 'paradoxes', things that you would not normally expect. We get to see this clearly in the open, inclusive, status-quo challenging Jesus, in who he meets and engages with, and in the fantastic acts of healing the body, mind and spirit.

Sadly, exclusion and marginalization are still problems for our society today as they were in Jesus' time, perhaps even more so when we seriously reflect on just who is actually connected in and who is forgotten in this time of isolation. So, let us all confront and stand up to injustice; to listen to those whose voices are often drowned out; and let us be paradoxes in a world that's too often selfish and narrow minded. Let us be challenged by the nature of God's kingdom and in doing so feel that 'we have seen remarkable things today'. Amen.