

Embrace the other

Luke 17:11-10

I think of myself as one of you – a tiller of the Marston clay - a land holder in Marston for £7 a year – yes, I have an allotment. People ask me what I grow: right now I have spinach, corn, marrows, cabbage, beetroot, leeks, sunflowers. All through my years as Vicar of the University Church, this was a refuge, a real cleanser of the mind, a place of retreat, and of course the provider of a healthy diet.

Today we have a story of cleansing of a different kind – the Ten Lepers. On the surface it's a simple story of gratitude and ingratitude. Of ten people cured of leprosy only one returns to give thanks. But when we think about it carefully there are more layers than we realised. First, the man who returns to Jesus is a foreigner. A Samaritan. What would a contemporary equivalent be? An immigrant? A Syrian? A benefit cheat? An Arsenal supporter to a Tottenham supporter? And immediately you are reminded of the story of the *Good Samaritan* in which a priest and a Levite, religious holy men, ignore the man who has been beaten up by thieves, whereas a foreign Samaritan binds up the man's wounds and takes him to an inn and pays for his recovery. These are kind of anti-Brexit stories. They are about seeing the good in alien people; about inclusivity and openness and they keep up the longstanding Jewish tradition that goes back to the nomadic days of the wilderness when you were obliged to be welcoming and hospitable to the stranger.

Another important aspect is that those healed are lepers. In Biblical times it was thought that leprosy was spread by touch and those suffering from the disease were outcasts and forced to live separately. They were untouchables. In Matthew 8 there's another healing story where a single leper says to Jesus, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean,' and Jesus touches him as part of the cure. This is a radical thing to do; indeed an illegal thing to do. It shows Jesus' radical approach to the law and his radical acceptance of people as they are.

In fact, as we all know now, leprosy is a mildly-infectious disease caused by a germ, or bacterium, called *mycobacterium leprae*, spread primarily through coughing and sneezing. It causes an infection that affects the skin, destroys nerves and can cause problems in the eyes and nose.

If left untreated, leprosy leads to a loss of sensation in the hands and feet. Without feeling pain, people injure themselves and the injuries can become infected, resulting in tissue loss. Repeated injury and infection of numb areas in the fingers or toes particularly in relation to heat when cooking or making a fire can cause severe damage.

In biblical times, it was almost universally believed that only God could heal. In 2 Kings 5 there's a story of Naaman, a commander of the Syrian army who happened to be a leper. He approached the king of Israel for healing and the king said, 'Am I God, to kill and make alive?' Naaman and the king of Syria also held the view that healing could be bought with money, but when eventually the prophet Elisha was asked to help he told Naaman simply to go and bathe seven times in the River Jordan and he would be healed. Naaman was indignant and said that at least Elisha might have come and waved his hands around over me. But Naaman's attendants persuaded him to follow the advice; he bathed and was cured. Elisha wouldn't accept any of the fine gifts he was offered because he suggested that were Naaman to accept God of the Israelites that would be sufficient reward.

Sometimes other skin disease were mistaken for leprosy. When I was in my late twenties I suffered from *pityriasis rosea* , a relatively common skin condition that causes a temporary skin rash of raised, red scaly patches on the body. The itching was terrible and I was taking a couple of baths a day to try to ease it. It was late in the year and I happened to be going to lead a pilgrimage to Israel over Christmas. One of the trips was to the Dead Sea and to bathe in the sea which is so heavy with minerals that you can lie back in it and read the Times. Of course the Jordan runs into the Dead Sea and maybe this is where Naaman bathed. After my dip I was better in a couple of days!

A third aspect of the 10 lepers story is that it provides a building block of morality. We have all seen the reluctant child forced to say thank you. 'Say thank you to your grandma or you won't be allowed to watch TV.' And eventually Grandma receives a grudging thank you. What is it that can make thanks so difficult and why is the generous and whole-hearted thank you so much more creative and generative?

What do I conclude from all of this? It can be summed up in welcoming the other. Seeing the other. Imagining what it is like to be in someone else's shoes. For example, the poor people of Haiti desolated by the hurricane this week.

But there's a practical problem which seems to me almost irresolvable: what when there are too many others? This is a real moral dilemma. Are we reaching a point in world overpopulation where the values of welcoming the other, which as I said, developed in the nomadic life of travelling farmers are becoming impossible – the Syrian/European migration crisis. Because it's not only the Middle East, it's Africa too with potentially millions and millions of people wanting refuge. Morality in extremis. Jesus' extreme morality.

And finally, here's a little twist in the tail. God is often referred to as the divine other. Because God is apart, separate, greater than us. If God is so great he must be different. Psychology: God is such a counter intuitive notion. Thomas Aquinas claims God is omnipresent, omnipotent, impassible, perfect etc. This is out on a limb, alien, beyond our experience or understanding. Therefore God is other.

Judging by most of our hymns we want to think of God as a bigger friendly form of us. Imago Dei. Anthropomorphism. In wars e.g. First World War both sides have prayed to God for the destruction of the other. But God cannot belong to our parish or to our nation, or when you think about it, even to our planet. Even though we have no idea whether there are religious beings anywhere else in the universe.

So if we wish to follow God we should always try to see the good in one another...and embrace the other.