



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The 17th Sunday after Trinity Proper 23 Year C

**2 Timothy 2.8-15**

**Luke 17.11-19**

Our gospel reading today deals with the account of the ten lepers. By coincidence I am rereading the Brother Cadfael novel, 'The leper of St. Giles' by Elis Peters. The chapel of St. Giles stands about three quarters of a mile from Shrewsbury Abbey. It was a shelter for those that were sick; in that respect it was similar to our own Spital Chapel. St. Giles' however was a 'lazer' house in other words it provided a refuge for lepers and the brothers took turns in serving there. Leprosy is a vile disease, there was no cure and it was contagious. Apart from the sickness they had to put up with not being allowed near people; the only society that they could join was people who were suffering from the same disease. Leprosy was a terror to those who had it and to those who feared contagion.

The ten lepers in our gospel account are travelling together, sick and maimed, their lives would have been, as the novel puts it, 'a living hell.' Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to face his final battle with evil. Now he is faced with the evil of disease which has afflicted these poor people. Crowds would be with him and we can imagine the horror they would have felt at the approach of these lepers. No doubt they fell back and turned away. Once again the lepers would face the spurning and disgust that was a part of their lives. They act in the way required, no leper would approach a healthy person,

<sup>11</sup>'On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup>As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance,'

We also notice where Jesus was, the area between Samaria and Galilee. Samaria was not a safe place for a Jew to be but we have seen that Jesus often does not avoid that route but approaches Jerusalem through Samaria. What happens next is that they call for healing,

<sup>13</sup> 'they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!'

Having described this disease briefly it is obvious that their lives were destroyed, all that the future held was a slow living death. They had no life really, no choice but to journey on together, outsiders,

spurned and feared. There was no cure; they were in fact living a life that was without hope, without joy.

Yet suddenly they stand before Jesus, I think it is worth reflecting here that Jesus is on his final journey, he is therefore a man about to be killed. He is hated and feared by the Jewish powers because they are jealous of him, because he challenges them and stands up for truth. In other words this man is dangerous to be with, join him and you could suffer the same stigma. The lepers care nothing for this; Jesus is their only hope of a cure. Nothing on earth can help them, only this man. His reputation has gone before him, his power is cosmic; he can heal the sick, restore life and control the elements. Why should he not have power over the worst of diseases? So they call to him maybe in faith but certainly in desperate need. Jesus does not draw back. He simply speaks and his words are enough. Jesus speaks in God's power.

<sup>14</sup> 'When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean.'

If a person with leprosy believed they were cured they had to show themselves to the local priest who would confirm it or not. That is the order Jesus gives. When they leave Jesus they do so as lepers, no doubt some of them wondered if a cure would follow or not. Jesus is never defeated by evil, on their way to fulfil the required duty they are cured.

It is almost impossible to imagine their joy. The lepers were dead but they are alive. Their living hell has been turned into a wonderful new life. It is as if a person we love was thought to have a deadly disease but then we found all was well. The world would be changed in an instant, tragedy would become inexpressible joy. So it was for these lepers and off they went to the priest, lives restored. All but one, and in his joy he returns.

<sup>15</sup> 'Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

<sup>16</sup>He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.'

There is no doubt in this man's mind what he should do. His life has been restored. At once he begins to praise God; he knows that the healing is a miracle. He must rush back to thank Jesus. So he returns not only to thank him but to fall down before the man who has turned everything around. This man has the power from God to defeat evil whatever form it takes.

What Jesus says now is very pointed. Firstly, where are the other nine? All were cured of a deadly disease; all had no life now they are clean but only one came back,

<sup>17</sup> 'Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? <sup>18</sup>Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?'

Note Jesus says 'to give praise to God,' it is through the power of God that Jesus heals, he never acts of himself. Yet of course we know that Jesus is human and divine. Through his power Jesus does turn lives around in so many ways. This one man comes back and he is not a Jew he is a Samaritan, a member of a community shunned by the Jews. Jesus cures them all, Samaritan and Jew, God is the God of all. Jesus came to save all humanity. People's conflicts of race, colour and so on are not acceptable to God, all are loved, and all are cared for equally. So often it is the outcast, the foreigner, the sinner or the woman who shows the way that people should behave while the Jews fall at the first hurdle. Of course it is a tragic illustration of the way Jesus was generally rejected by his own people. He came first to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' but most turned away from his message of salvation and hope.

Jesus touches lives now; we know that he has power to change the lives of people who turn to him. It is worth pausing to ask ourselves how often do we say thank you? The Samaritan owed a huge

debt of gratitude and so do we. Jesus gave his life in love for all humanity. We were enslaved by sin just as surely as this man was by his disease. Jesus' triumph on the cross set humanity free; God gives his grace to us. We owe him everything. Notice Jesus' last words, so often he says this,  
<sup>19</sup> 'Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

Faith and trust in the power of Jesus are central. This man has faith and I wonder if he did simply go on his way cured or if, as well as this, he became a lifelong follower of Jesus. Can you imagine the reaction when he went back to his family, his friends and his town cured of the disease? He would witness to Jesus and I am sure brought others to faith in him too. This is what we are called to do. We are also called to help the oppressed, the marginalised, the sick and the outcast. We are called to show compassion and to care for others. In our lives we are to be inclusive, and by doing that to draw others to Jesus. We must build up not belittle and act according to the example Jesus gave. This is his commission and he expects no less.

So we come to our epistle reading from the second letter of Paul to Timothy. We have seen that Timothy faces many difficulties. He lives in Ephesus, the centre of the worship of the goddess Artemis. Also within the Roman Empire Caesar was a god. Anyone who didn't confess that Caesar was Lord could expect retribution. As we saw last week for Christians there was only one Lord, Jesus Christ. Paul begins our reading by making quite clear what gospel he proclaims.

<sup>8</sup> 'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel,' Jesus Christ is the centre of everything. Jesus is the Son of David, he is the Messiah foretold by the scriptures. Everything in God's plan revealed to the Jews, finds its fulfilment in Jesus. The point is Jesus walked with humanity, he died for us on the cross but that was not the end, had it been as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:

'Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.'

Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and thus we will be raised with him. That is the central teaching. This is the teaching, the 'true faith' that Timothy and others like him must spread. Paul is suffering for the gospel; so many Christians will suffer a similar fate.

<sup>9</sup> 'for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.'

Paul knows that Timothy faces that danger too but that is as nothing compared to doing the work of Jesus. The reward is sure for those who hold fast to the faith,

<sup>11</sup> 'The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; <sup>12</sup> if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; <sup>13</sup> if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.'

Jesus has promised eternal life to those who walk in his way. Yes the way will be difficult especially in a world that denies him. It may lead to persecution and death but Paul says we have the promise of life. There is however the awful warning that cannot be ignored, if we deny him Jesus will also deny us. There must be no turning back. Jesus has made it very clear in his parables that those who

disown him will be disowned in turn. The circumstances the early Christians face and indeed Christians down the ages have had to face are difficult. When people get hauled out in front of the authorities and face punishment or death very few will not feel trepidation. But Jesus will remain faithful, as Paul says he will stand alongside to strengthen those who fear. Jesus knew what perils his followers would face. Indeed he had walked that way before them, he had faced the might of Rome and every evil that could be thrown at him but in God's strength he vanquished evil on the cross. He warned his followers of the danger, Mark 13:

<sup>9</sup> 'As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. <sup>10</sup>And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. <sup>11</sup>When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.'

There are three central points here, firstly don't be afraid, Jesus will never leave you alone, the Holy Spirit will strengthen you. Secondly those who are faithful to Jesus will inherit his promise of eternal life and finally, the gospel must be proclaimed to all nations. No longer is the message to the Jews alone, now it is for the entire world. Paul himself was the 'apostle to the Gentiles.' Jesus' commission to his disciples was to 'go and baptise all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' To do this, to fulfil this commission is difficult and very dangerous, Paul knows that. He is imprisoned and will very soon be executed but he knows he has done his best for his Lord and Christ is at the centre of his life. He will receive the promises of God; he will have eternal life with him. Now youngsters like Timothy must take up the role and work for Jesus in the same way.

<sup>14</sup> 'Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. <sup>15</sup>Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.'

Paul has already said he trusts Timothy to witness to the true faith. As well as living in a society which worships many gods and daily risking persecution, there is another problem. Some Christians are being drawn from the true faith; some are changing it and perverting it with different teachings and doctrines. That is a real danger. At the beginning of the chapter Paul refers to this when he says,

<sup>2.1</sup> 'You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; <sup>2</sup>and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.'

It is vital that the teaching given by Jesus and passed down through Paul and the other Christian missionaries is not changed in any way, when that does happen the results are disastrous.

<sup>17</sup> 'and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, <sup>18</sup> who have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place. They are upsetting the faith of some.'

Here one heresy is pointed out. The truth of the Christian faith is that Jesus Christ died and he rose again in bodily form on that first Easter morning. There he conquered death forever, there he won eternal life for us. There will be a bodily resurrection in God's recreated order when Jesus comes again to rule heavens and earth. We say in the Creed, 'We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.' That newly created order will come in God's time. We will rest with

Jesus but we will rise with him on that promised day. Those people who were perverting the truth were a deadly danger. Some would claim there was no bodily resurrection. All sorts of heresies would develop. Paul has taught the truth and his followers must do the same and refute these false teachings.

Timothy had a hard task but he had Paul's trust and worked in the strength of God. We live in a country where we are free to worship and we need to thank God for that. So many in the world still face danger every day for their beliefs but they can rest assured that God's Holy Spirit is with them. At times of fear or danger we know that the Spirit is with us too to strengthen and sustain us. We have a relationship with God who is our Father. We talk to him in prayer, worship him and rest with him in the stillness.

*God of all times and all places, who sees and knows all, we sit in your presence and feel your deep peace.*

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