

His ministry on to the preaching of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God (1:38), but it is hard to imagine that Jesus could have lost His cool and been angry with the leper or spoken harshly to him in an unnecessary manner. The intensity of the verbs used in this story point, in my opinion, to the intensity of the situation which was gradually pushing Jesus towards changing the direction of His ministry.

The beginnings of this change of tack are to be found in the statement that Jesus 'stayed outside in more deserted places' (1:45 and see above), unable to avoid the constant attention of the crowds clamouring for healing without keeping his distance. People continued to come to Jesus, but things were about to change, and although chapter 1 ends after this story, it is likely that from Mark's point of view (when writing his Gospel), the story of the healing of the paralytic which comes next (2:1-12) indicates the changes Jesus made. As we will see in tomorrow's reading, Jesus began to speak to those he healed in a new way, about sin and forgiveness. In this way, He brought the message of the Kingdom of God into His healing ministry. We will find that this is the only proper way to understand this miracle, but it helps to know all about what led Jesus to begin not just to heal people, but to connect this directly to the Gospel.

Application

Whatever view we take of Jesus mood or the force of the emotions spent in this incident, the fact remains that Jesus healed a leper who asked for healing. Even if Jesus was filled with righteous anger and spoke to the man harshly because He didn't trust him, the fact of his healing is secure; and in the light of what he did, Jesus was right to be mistrustful of the man and his ability to be respectfully obedient. The uncertainty about all this could be seen as a reminder that despite His emotions, Jesus was in control of both them and what He did. He healed because it was right so to do, and this should give us confidence that God is still concerned to heal people whatever their circumstances, and certainly before they have addressed issues of faith or the Kingdom of God. It is undoubtedly Jesus' intent to draw people into hearing the Gospel, but the basic reason for healing remains the need of the people.

Today, there is no shortage of needy people within our world who may not be willing to face the call of the Gospel, but who are willing to do almost anything to gain the healing of their bodies. Despite the advanced capabilities of medical care, many people become trapped in chronic illnesses as they grow older and their quality of life deteriorates. In our own day, the church has largely withdrawn from the healing ministry, mistrustful of some of its manifestations and cautious about raising false hopes. Perhaps we should learn from this passage that if we began to address people's real felt needs in the name of Christ, then we could have a much larger response to our work than we might imagine. As with Jesus, we might be frustrated that we cannot always preach the Gospel through such ministry, and we have to learn how this can be done. But there is nothing wrong in starting where Jesus Himself started; healing people because they were in need.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group whether the passage makes more or less sense if you read it as if Jesus was angry with the leper.
2. Discuss why you think Jesus felt it important for the man to go and obtain ritual forgiveness from priests.
3. Why should Jesus be so cautious about the attentions of large crowds?

Discipleship

Healing ministry is not just about what we do for others, it is about the view we have of ourselves before God. Do we really believe that He is interested in the details of our lives, our coughs and colds initially, and eventually our more complex health problems? Examine your own heart about whether you have asked the Lord to heal you when you have needed His healing touch for small or large health issues. It is too easy for us to 'go to the doctor' and leave our Lord out of any thoughts about our health, and this can make our faith inconsistent with the Gospel.

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Friend; give us peace in the midst of strife, joy in the midst of unhappiness, and grace in the midst of trouble. By this we know your love and affection, and may we never take it for granted. AMEN

Prayer

Almighty God and Lord of all history, we call on You to make Yourself known through what is happening in the world around us. Give us eyes to see Your love, Your justice, Your mercy and Your guidance all around us. Give us the wisdom to explain it to a world which needs understanding and direction. In the name of our Saviour Jesus, we pray; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Please pray for the USA which is going through its system of Presidential elections which conclude at the end of the year. There is no doubt that the Presidency of the USA is probably the most significant and powerful political post decided by the voters of one country but which deeply effects the whole world. Pray for the guidance of the people as they vote this year.

Meditation

Each day people face danger and despair:

Elderly people who discover they have health problems
and question what their future holds;

Young people who feel the pain of broken relationships
and wonder whether they will ever find true love;

Children who are raised, unknown, in abusive homes
and know little else by which to learn and grow;

Those who are in debt and unable to provide for their families
and who have no knowledge of where to turn;

People who face death and have never dealt with their feelings
and know not how to ask God for forgiveness and help;

Women who feel in danger because of domestic violence
and do not feel able to call for assistance;

Men who have lost their confidence, rejected by those they love
and confused by why they cannot cope;

Each day people face danger and despair,

And only Jesus can open the windows of earth and heaven

To bring light to the pathway of life.

Bible Study - Mark 1:40-45

⁴⁰ A leper came to Him, and he knelt down and implored Him, 'If you so wish, you have the power to make me clean.'⁴¹ Full of emotion, He stretched out His hand touched him, and said to him; 'I do so wish. Be clean!'⁴² The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. ⁴³ Then He spoke to him strictly and dismissed him, ⁴⁴ 'See that you say nothing to anyone about this,' He said, 'but go and show yourself to the priest and offer what Moses requires for your cleansing, as evidence for them. ⁴⁵ However, when he left, he began to make it generally known and spread the news around, so that Jesus could no longer enter a city openly. Instead, He stayed outside in more deserted regions. But people continued to come to Him from everywhere.

Review

Our reading today is the last healing story from the burst of activity with which Jesus' ministry began. There was a growing demand within Capernaum and Galilee for Jesus to perform more healings, and this time, Jesus heals a man with leprosy. The man was an outcast because of the stigma of his disease; he was regarded as ritually 'unclean' and therefore unable either to live with his family or take part in normal community life. He certainly needed healing, yet more than that, he needed to be cleansed so that he could regain his life and place in the community (1:40). The ancient laws declaring leprosy 'impure' were designed to protect people from

disease in days before medicine, and although the stigma was terrible, it is not too difficult to understand the social dilemma presented by leprosy.

Everything that had happened in Jesus' ministry so far comes together in this event, and Mark tells the story as a summary of those early days. The growth of Jesus' healing ministry was entirely understandable, for sick people always seek a healer. Nevertheless, Jesus was acutely aware of His higher call firstly to preach the message of the Gospel, and also to enable people to engage with Him through faith and repentance.

Concerned for this greater work, Jesus withdrew from the crowds and prayed (1:35), and after this, He continued His ministry by both preaching and healing in greater Galilee (1:39). So when the leper came and knelt before Jesus to ask Him for healing (1:40), Jesus was faced not just with the man's need for healing, but with a failing religious system that was denying people access to their God.

To begin with, the leper came to Jesus on bended knee (1:40), and this was no simple gesture. It was the posture used by people when worshipping God, and it is the first indication in the Gospel that people were beginning to wonder who Jesus really was. Was He the Son of God? Jesus' response to this is interesting. Verse 14 describes Him as being 'full of emotion', and you will find that different versions of the Bible say quite different things; 'filled with compassion' (N.I.V.) or 'moved with pity' (N.R.S.V.) What Mark wrote here is not as clear as we might like, so we cannot be clear about His exact emotions. Nevertheless, something about this stirred Jesus' spirit, and He immediately went to heal him (1:41); he touched the man, spoke to him, and healed him instantly (1:41,42).

This much is what we would expect, but not what comes next! Jesus then spoke very strongly to the leper (1:44) and commanded him to refrain from speaking about what had happened; Jesus added that he should go to the local priests so that he could be formally declared clean, according to Jewish law. However, instead of doing this, he began to speak to everyone else about his experiences! Consequently, through the disobedience of this healed leper, Jesus' healing ministry was known further afield, and Jesus was forced to leave the cities and live out in the open, away from the crowds (1:45). Jesus' famous phrase comes to mind 'foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head ...' (Matt 8:20, Luke 9:58).

Why did Jesus withdraw, and what was really going on in His mind? We will find some answers to this as we read on in the Gospel, however, the important features of the story is Jesus' deeply emotional response to human need set against the inflexibility of a religious system supposed to give people help and succour. People were crying out, literally, for release from the oppressions of sickness, but also from being bound by religious rules. The leper's response to his healing showed this perfectly; he did not go to the priests, because he had received from Jesus what he needed, and to him, the religious system was irrelevant! Jesus saw all this, and as people continued to come to Him (1:45), He also continued to heal out of compassion, but longed for people to repent, and have faith in Him. What was at stake was not personal health, but life and death in the Kingdom of God..

Going Deeper

We must therefore look further at the words and phrases of this story which appear so simple on the surface. To do this is not to question the integrity of the story, but to find out why Mark recorded it as he did, and try to find out what is meant by Jesus' words and reactions; as well as understand why the whole story carries so much pathos and understanding of the human condition. It is best to divide up this story into two halves, the first part being the approach of the leper and the healing itself, and the second being the response to the healing.

Jesus and the healing of the leper (1:40-42)

The traditional view of this story is that the leper came to Jesus in the abject poverty of his state and in dire need of help, kneeling before Jesus and begging Him to help. Whatever else was happening in Mark chapter 1, here was a man who desperately needed help and was prepared to stoop low for it; but more than that, what he had heard about Jesus led him to believe that Jesus alone could heal him and make him 'clean'. Leprosy was a general term in those days which covered a large number of probably infectious skin complaints, dealt with in the Old Testament in Leviticus 13 and 14. The Levitical law set out the social norm whereby those who had such skin complaints had to live outside of the towns, villages and encampments of Israel, and only when a priest could verify that someone was cured and 'clean' of the disease could

they return to family and society. It was the tough but effective infection control of ancient times, but it was profoundly hard for those who had leprosy. In fact, it left sufferers in a sometimes appalling state from which it was hard to recover physically or psychologically.

The previous centuries of life in Judea had been dominated by a pervading Greek / Roman culture which was forced on the area after Alexander the Great invaded the whole region in around 320BC. In Jesus' day, the Roman authorities were more liberal about matters of 'cleanliness', and many Jews took offense at this. The party of the Pharisees arose as a group of religious enthusiasts who were determined to re-impose the Laws of Moses as the foundation of Judaism and ensure that Jews became separate and distinct from the cultural changes happening all around them. It was against this backdrop of increased pressure from the religious authorities that a terrible ostracism of lepers was taking place in Jesus' day.

Some people have looked carefully at the text and concluded that the leper did not come to Jesus in homage with a sincere request, but mocking and challenging Him to heal him if He could. The Greek is unclear, but it is hard to translate the Greek without implying that the leper was either worshipping Jesus or mocking Him, and most versions of the Bible convey the opinion that he came in worship, believing that Jesus could heal him because of what he had heard. The difficulty in the whole passage comes in verse 41, where most ancient versions of the Bible begin the verse with a Greek word 'splangnistheis' which means to be emotional or compassionate. However one very important and very early copy of the New Testament has a different word here which is 'orgistheis', which means 'to be angry'! This has emboldened those who think that the whole exchange between Jesus and the leper was an angry exchange; however, we all know that there is such a thing as righteous anger, which is a deep emotion which fits the story very well, suggesting that Jesus was incensed at the plight of the leper, and willing to heal him whatever the circumstances.

The text of our reading says clearly that as soon as Jesus touched the leper and spoke to him, an action which would have drawn gasps from anyone who saw it, he was 'made clean'. You could even argue that technically, Jesus never 'touched' a leper (which would have contravened Leviticus 5:3) because His holiness meant that the leprosy left him as soon as Jesus touched him!

The response of the leper

Again, in verse 43 we are faced with a dilemma about the nature of what happened between the leper and Jesus. The verse contains two verbs, 'speak strictly', and 'dismiss' and there is no doubt that they are harsh and austere words which are used to describe the tenor of Jesus' words to the leper which come in the next verse (1:44). It should be expected however, that Jesus would speak strongly, even out of compassion. We have already seen that Jesus was beginning to tire of people coming for healing and not being interested in anything except a demonstration of power, so on this occasion, he commanded the leper to go to the priests.

The traditional ritual for cleansing required a priest to examine a person to discern whether the infection had cleared up, over a period of time (see Leviticus 13). Then, if someone was clear of infection then a small ritual was carried out in which two birds were brought; one of which was killed and its blood sprinkled as a sign of cleansing, and the other one released as a sign of new life for that person (Leviticus 14:2-9). It was a primitive ritual, revived in Jesus' day as part of the general movement towards a more rigorous Judaism, but it seems far from the kind of religion that Jesus would have taught.

Nevertheless, just as Jesus had not healed on the Sabbath day (see how the crowds waited until the end of the Sabbath before seeking healing -1:33), He was not yet interested in any conflict with the religious authorities despite their excesses, and He was concerned to do things correctly. The man had come on bended knee (1:40) offering Jesus homage, but after healing the man, He wanted him to give the glory to God by publicly doing what the Law required. Certainly, if the healed leper had done as Jesus said and given glory to God, it might have prevented the unhelpful mass response to Jesus' healing ministry which was developing so soon after the beginning of His ministry.

Yet again, however, the response of the leper was not helpful to Jesus' ministry, as is made quite clear in the last verse (1:45). He continued the general spread of news about Jesus as a healer to the point that Jesus 'could no longer enter a city openly' (1:45). This is an extraordinary statement, for Jesus had hardly spent much time in ministry, yet the response was overwhelming. We already know from previous verses that Jesus was concerned to move