

Questions from the story of Jesus and the Lepers

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 9 October 2022

A Reflection by Dr Sally Longley

Pentecost 18C

Jeremiah 29: 1, 4-7; Luke 17: 11-19

The video of this reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

Well thank you so much for having me join you today. It's a real joy to be here, so thank you; and thank you especially Jo.

So what a passage! I think I'd want to suggest we start with just taking a moment to think - what are my edges? What are the edges in my life that I'm encountering around me? What are the edgy places? and where are the edgy places within myself? Because yes, this is a passage about gratitude. But it's so much more than gratitude it's a thick story, this one. And I think one of the gifts that the Jewish hermeneutic gives us is to read with question marks, not with exclamation marks or full stops.

So let's have a look then at this amazing passage. And I think it's one of the quest stories. There are several quest stories in Luke's gospel and this is one of them. So I guess it comes to us as "*what are we questing for?*" You know, you're on next steps, I understand, looking at next steps. What is that quest? What is that quest?

So, chapter 17. On the way to Jerusalem! And here we start already with "*on the way*". Things happen on the way don't they. So Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem and he's approached. He goes into a town and he's approached. And it's interesting. We know the story that when the lepers are sent off, as they are on their way they are healed. So when we're on our way things happen. Are we alert to that? Are we noticing that? what happens when we're on the way? We're moving. We're on the way.

He was passing along between Samaria and Galilee and we know about Samaria and Galilee. There are tensions between the two groups of people, between the two regions. And there's no sort of - this isn't about a GPS spot of where Jesus is. It's highlighting the fact that Jesus is walking through borderlands here. Borderlands, places between Galilee and Samaria, that place between - it's neither this nor that - and yet it is a place like - a borderland is a place, so it does away with the kind of binary - in or out.

A borderland is a place. Lost is a place. So there are many borderlands and so there's this whole spectrum, if you like, of places to be. But borderlands generally, of whatever type, that's where we encounter Christ. That's where we encounter the source of life. And things happen. So here, Jesus is in the borderland.

So, I guess, for ourselves, where are the borderlands, the edges in ourselves that we run away from? Because if we go to those places in ourselves, that's where we will encounter the source of all life. And when we go to the places around us of borderlands, that's where we encounter the God of all life, the living one! The one that gives and heals and sees us.

So he was met by ten lepers who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices and said: "*Jesus, Master have mercy on us*". It's interesting that, normally, they would have to cry out: "*unclean, unclean!*" But here they call out for mercy! So there's something about Jesus that they see. There's a source of mercy here, so they see. And isn't it so often, that those who are excluded, the ones who are rejected by society, are often the ones who have the greatest sight. We think of the blind people in scripture. They're the ones who can really see and hear.

The lepers see something of who Jesus is. And then it doesn't say Jesus hears them. It says Jesus sees them. There's this reciprocity of seeing. So Jesus sees them, knows them. You know it's that whole Hagar thing of the God who sees me, who sees deeply me, the real me, and all of who I am. And so there's that amazing encounter! Seeing one another.

And we also know that leprosy can refer to a range of skin diseases. But often it has something to do with numbing, loss of feeling. That in itself says something to us. A loss. So he says to them: "*go and show yourself to the priest*". And so, on their way they're healed.

Which priest? Like - if they were all Jewish people, they would go to the Jewish priest. But there's at least one Samaritan. And there may have been women. You know, usually things are referred to as X number of men and we don't know how many women. Probably women and children there as well! We don't know. That's a question. We've read it with question marks. We don't know!

We don't know what the disciples were thinking when all of this was happening, but which priests were they to go to? And what about the Samaritan? He's not going to go to the Jewish priest! So where does he go? Does he go to the high priest? The Samaritan high priest?

And yet when he's healed (assuming it's a he. It seems to be a he) - turns and comes back to Jesus. And I wonder, too, whether he sees that Jesus actually is the priest! Jesus is actually the priest, so he comes and worships. And the word for thanks? Jesus uses actually the same word we get Eucharist from.

And Jesus then says: "*where are the others?*" And I thought, well Jesus told them to go to the priest, so they're being obedient. They're doing the right thing aren't they? That's what they're asked to do. Maybe they're going to come back later? Maybe they thought: "*we've got to do the right thing. Maybe our healing will be taken away from us if we don't do the right thing. We'll go to the priest and show ourselves*".

And they're probably desperate to be reunited with their family! So is there something wrong with that? I don't know. I'm reading it with a question mark. I don't know whether they're going to come back later and find Jesus, to thank Jesus. I don't know. It's a question. Or do we get so caught up in doing the right thing that we don't do the better thing. The thing that is really of goodness and greatness. You know, so much truth is sacrificed on the altar of niceness in our Church communities. So were they just doing the right thing, being nice?

So anyway, he comes back and he says to him, *rise*. Jesus says: "*rise and go your way*. Another "*on your way*". *Your faith has made you well.*"

He's already been healed, so the faith is perhaps that recognition of intimacy. The relationship. The coming to the Christ, being with the Christ, worshipping the Christ, contacting the Christ, falling at the Christ's feet. That intimacy, maybe, that's also what then makes that person well, restores that person's sense of our identity, gives feeling back, has a sense of belonging.

So there's another question that I have. And that is: so often we have empathy, but what lives in the basement of empathy is disgust. And so sometimes you can have a very empathetic person, for example, who can't handle going into hospitals, because the sense of concern and fear and pain and so on is overwhelming for them. So they turn away. So to be empathetic doesn't necessarily mean you move towards someone. Maybe there are some things where we have empathy but it makes us move away and we have a disgust response. And what we need to do is open the trap door to that disgust response in us and let that be healed.

There's an amazing quote (I don't know if you know his work) Michael Eigen has written a book in 2005 called *The Emotional Storm*; and he says: "*to not cultivate the feel of another is a kind of soul murder. The evolution of the human race depends not on aborting the feel of another. Not to cultivate the feel of another is a kind of soul murder and the evolution of human race depends on not aborting the feel of another*".ⁱ

I think we all have work to do in just discovering what is the places of disgust in me that make me turn away and not, like the Christ, moving towards. An empathy that moves towards. An empathy that sees and goes toward encounter, rather than moving away.

So maybe that's something for us to think about when we're on our way towards something. What might be stopping us? What might be holding us back? Are we doing the right thing? The nice thing? The thing by law, rather than the better thing? Sometimes we need to be disobedient to laws that don't give us the best option!

So may God's grace bless us as we walk the borderlands around us and within us as well.

And let us not fear those, but rather know that that's where Christ will encounter us and we will encounter Christ.

Amen

ⁱ Michael Eigen. *Emotional Storm* (Wesleyan U.P., 2005)