

Painful Healing

2 Kings 5:1-14, Psalm 30, 1Cor 9:16-23, Mark 1:25-39

Children's Address

Who here has had Chicken Pox?

How do you know if you've got it?

Can you go to school if you have chicken pox?

Can you go to church if you have chicken pox?

Today in Sunday School you will be learning about a man who had a skin disease. It was thought to be catching. So he couldn't go to church. The key difference is that it wasn't the sort of disease that went away in ten days. It didn't go away at all.

This meant that he couldn't go to church. Ever.

The Good News from today's story is that Jesus healed the man; he presented himself to the priest who checked he didn't have any spots; and then he was able to go to church again.

Jesus showed that he cared about people who were sick, and Jesus cared about people who found it hard to go to church.

Adult's Address

I have never knowingly met or seen someone with leprosy.

But the stories of healing we have heard in Scripture today speak to me.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the name leprosy is given to a number of physical conditions unrelated to leprosy. [It is inconceivable that someone with leprosy could remain in active military service as Namaan did.] For Hebrews, these physical conditions were considered as punishment by God for sin. The victim was considered to be in a state of tsara'ath, or defilement. This ancient Hebrew term was later translated as leprosy, from which came the word leprosy. The power of today's stories is not diminished if the disease concerned were not leprosy, but a skin disease of some sort. But for today, please allow me to explore the healing of leprosy.

Of course, our understandings of the causes and treatments of disease are very different from the understandings that prevailed in Biblical times.

In Biblical times, the cause of leprosy was unknown. It was only as recently as 1874 that a Norwegian doctor, Gerhard Hansen identified the bacillus that causes leprosy. The disease is now called Hansen's disease.

In Biblical times, leprosy was classified as a skin disease. Today Hansen's disease is identified as a disease of the nervous system.

In Biblical times, leprosy was incurable. Today there are several drugs which halt the progress of the disease.

There being no treatment in Biblical times, a sufferer of the disease was excluded from society. Separated from their family, their friends, and their worshipping community. To add to this, they were further stigmatised - accused of being punished by God. Today, with the availability of appropriate drugs, a sufferer can continue to be a part of their society.

Jesus' healing of the man in today's gospel was an act of great compassion. Jesus recognised the man's predicament. Jesus saw that the man was suffering a dreaded disease. Jesus felt the anguish of ostracism. Jesus knew that this man was not being punished by God.

Perhaps it is presumptuous to suggest what Jesus did and did not know – however, in the gospel of John chapter 9 Jesus was shown another man in tsara'ath, (or defilement), a man born blind at birth. Jesus was asked whether it was the sin of the man or his parents that had brought about his blindness from birth. Jesus' reply was definitive: It was neither, rather it was to show the glory of God.

In seeing, and feeling and knowing, Jesus had compassion for the man in today's gospel. Perhaps first and foremost, Jesus saw a man, not a leper. I'll repeat that: Jesus saw a man and not a leper.

I'm still working on this – the idea of interacting with people and not blind people, deaf people, crippled people, disfigured people, schizophrenic people. All the way down the line, Jesus interacted with people, and did not focus on their brokenness, whether it was physical, psychological, or spiritual.

And in his compassion, he healed the man. He restored him to his family, his friends, and his worshipping community.

As I began addressing you today, I said that I had never knowingly met or seen anyone with leprosy. But even in my own family, I have had relatives who have suffered from degeneration of the nervous system. My maternal grandmother was a survivor of breast cancer, but the radical treatment undertaken to save her life irreparably damaged the nerves in one arm. The functioning of the nerves deteriorated over time, and one day she was doing the ironing and hadn't realised that she had run the hot iron over her hand. If only her nerves had been working, and she could have felt pain. She needed extensive treatment for third degree burns. This is in many ways symptomatic of someone suffering from Hansen's disease.

I don't know how Jesus did it, but he healed the man's damaged nerves, and brought to life again his dead nerves. Jesus cured the man of leprosy, and his nervous system was fully restored. He once again could feel pain.

The man's health was clearly demonstrated by his ability to feel physical pain.

I would also suggest that emotional health is most clearly demonstrated by an ability to empathise with others – to feel other's pain.

Pain is not something I look forward to, or enjoy. It would be entirely unhealthy to look forward to or enjoy pain. But it is a natural and important part of life.

Some 20 years ago, I moved to Canberra, having grown up in Sydney, up till then, having lived in the one house all my life. I was moving away from my family and friends, moving to a strange city; and the total number of people I knew here was two. I was very nervous. You might say that I was grieving, and in pain. At a Youthworkers Conference, just a few weeks before I left, I shared my fears; as a parting gift they gave me a little volume entitled "So God said to me...".

Inside the front cover, amongst many signatures, one of my fellow youthworkers had written: "So God said to me: Pain is the surest sign of life".

There are times when I wistfully wonder about pain free life. But Jesus promised life in all its fullness, and a necessary and important part of life – from time to time – is pain.

Healing – physical, emotional, spiritual - is a wonderful gift from God, but it is not painless.

Amen