

Sermon preached at King's College Cambridge
Sunday October 13th 2019 - Trinity 17

In the 1947 film 'M. Vincent', the young priest who would one day be revered as St Vincent de Paul arrives in an isolated village to find it paralysed with angry anxiety about the plague, the Black Death. One household has been boarded and barred, by order of the local lord; the mother and child are trapped inside, immured, for fear they will transmit the disease. Vincent is so enraged by this that he breaks into the house and finds the mother dead, the dog howling with hunger and the tiny daughter sitting mute at the end of the bed, traumatised and famished. He rescues the child and buries the mother. The villagers are horrified, but he wins them over with his fearless devotion to the poorest of them, regardless of any danger to himself. It turns out that the woman did not have the plague. She had died of a lesser illness, or starvation, thanks entirely to the fearful over-reaction of the village.

That was the 17th century, but in every age you find similar stories: and especially when it comes to leprosy. Leprosy is totemic. It's as though it's not just infectious, but somehow embodies infection: and out of this comes stigma. It's one of the nastier facets in human behaviour: when understandable fear for your own health morphs into loathing of the unhealthy other. Add to that the stirring of ancient, pagan superstition, and you then see moral unworthiness projected onto sufferers: as though they've brought it on themselves. There is a whole chapter in the Old Testament, in the book Leviticus, on how those with leprosy or similar skin conditions might prove themselves clean to the religious authorities. And beneath all the fiddly, fastidious rituals lies a censorious, moralising undertone.

So all that was going on in the Jewish world of both Naaman the Syrian and the lepers encountered by Jesus. There are nicely ironic inter-weavings in the two stories. Naaman, military commander of a foreign aggressive neighbour, seeks the help of the Jewish prophet Elisha. He is scandalised by what he's asked to do, but once he has got off his high horse, he is healed. And it turns out that though he is arrogant, he is not stupid, and gives grateful credit to Elisha's God.

Then in the story of Jesus and the ten lepers, the only one to say thank you and complete the expression of his faith is the loathed foreigner, the Samaritan. There is more than one good Samaritan in Luke's gospel.

That slide from disease prevention to stigma and taboo is not confined to diseases of the skin. The experience of people living with HIV and Aids, especially in the 80's and 90's, is a particularly sharp example of that. And there, of course, sex rears its head. It was – and is – all too easy for people to say that sufferers had brought it upon themselves. What many actually meant was, they had brought it upon themselves by engaging in immoral or sinful sexual behaviour. I remember seeing a poster outside a church in London for years which said 'Aids is God's punishment'.

Whenever attitudes to disease or other infectious conditions display these characteristics of prejudice or taboo, one thing hovering in the background is some notion of *purity*. This is almost never beneficial or benevolent: either because it is squeamish about things of the body, or because it is perfectionist about moral virtues. An especially unhealthy and damaging example of this is in some of the harsher Christian denominations in America, with their purity rings for young women. I recommend you read Nadia Bolz-Weber on that subject.

How people can read the stories of Jesus, let alone claim to be open to the Spirit, and stick to such priggishness is a mystery to me. He constantly infuriated the religious authorities with his refusal to hide behind purity codes and social barriers. This doesn't mean that he didn't ask much of his followers. In so many ways he asked far more than any legalistic system might prescribe or proscribe. He was interested in the dispositions of our hearts.

It's from that perspective that we can hear Jesus talk about the 'pure in heart', and know that he is being both far more ambitious and far less box-tickingly censorious than those who bang on about purity. The Old Testament prophets anticipated him in this, with their repeated castigation of those who obsessed about cultic rigour and ignored the widow and orphan.

The Samaritan leper, with his simple faith and simple gratitude, like the tax collector bowed in self-lacerating, honest prayer, like the woman who reaches out to touch Jesus's hem, like the woman who pours priceless oil on Jesus' feet, like young John simply lying against Jesus' breast at the last supper – all these are the kinds of humble, hopeful discipleship from which we must learn.

Humble, hopeful discipleship is a lifelong journey, a kind of pilgrimage. For most of us that will be a messy business, sometimes leaping on, sometimes falling and having to be hauled up. Some of us may be blessed with a simple faith which is strong and beautiful. This is not to be confused with the kind of faith that thinks everything is terribly simple. That kind of faith tends to be dogmatic and binary, and is often a bit hard-hearted. The trouble with binary is that the only alternative to one is zero.

The real alternative is the desire to ‘put on the heart of Christ’, as a Jesuit writer I admire puts it. This may involve us trying any number of spiritual and personal disciplines; but if we are to look into the heart of Jesus and try to conform our own to it, that will demand a lifelong engagement with the complexity of both human life and divine reality. In the midst of such complexity, purity of heart will not be about some rigorous adherence to a code. There is another sort of purity we read of throughout the Bible, especially in the Old Testament: it is the purity of gold and of other precious substances. That’s a purity and preciousness which comes from being refined. And the refining fire is neither destructive nor aggressive: rather, it is perfectly designed to perfect the object of its refining. We call it grace.

So let us be open to God’s grace; open to that power which can unpick our clenched hearts, free us from stigma and edge us into a faith which is hopeful, humble and – like that Samaritan leper – grateful.

2 Kings 5.1-3, 7-15a; Luke 17.11-19

Andrew Hammond
Chaplain