

Sunday 5th September 2021

Luke 17:11-19 (The thankful outsider)

Talk by Russell Jones, Prayers by Hazel Willson

We begin a new sermon series today on the miracles of Jesus. We will hear about God's power to heal, and how every single person is included in God's love. Each of us is welcome in God's kingdom and he is willing to heal us, empower us, and support us when we welcome him into our lives. When people in the gospels, understand or experience the nature of God's power, such as the people Jesus healed, they respond with praise and prayer, and Hazel will lead us now in our prayers.

Prayers

Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi says, 'rejoice in the Lord always.....the Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God' and know His special peace. So we come to do just that – let us pray.

Our loving Father in heaven, despite all the troubles, challenges, pain and sadness around us, and often within us – we come to thank You for who You are, for what You have done in Jesus, and for Your love for us expressed in a multitude of blessings. Thank you for the promise in John's gospel that whosoever believes in Jesus shall not perish; no-one is beyond the Pale; for You are the ultimate in inclusiveness!

'The Lord is close to the broken-hearted' - Father, we come to plead for all those most affected by natural disasters at the moment – from the earthquake in Haiti; the devastation caused by hurricane Ida in Louisiana and New York; wildfires in several countries, and ongoing extreme weather generally. We ask strength, skill and safety for those helping to alleviate the damage, and for all who are vulnerable and frightened. Help us to do all we can to combat climate change. We remember so many around the world still in danger from Coronavirus and its variants, and particularly ask for a faster and fairer distribution of vaccines by the richer countries of the world. We pray for all those who are actively discriminated against because of race, caste, or faith. Father, prod us into action to lobby those who have the power to make a difference.

'Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it', Father, we lift to You the ongoing messy situation in Afghanistan, and pray for those who are willing to negotiate instead of fighting, so that people may live in peace and freedom; and that injustice, inequality, and hatred of those who are different, may be eradicated there, and in so many other places, and hearts. May Your kingdom values prevail, and Your church be bold to share Your love. Thank you for those who work for You in faraway places – we remember the Day family in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and give thanks with them that some of those women trafficked into sex slavery have found a way out, via a Christian organisation called The Whispering Willow. Thank you for this answer to faithful prayer.

'I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made' Father, we give You thanks for the way the Paralympian athletes have turned their disabilities into opportunities: for their

amazing feats of endurance, strength and skill, against the odds. May we take courage from them, and see people through Your eyes of love, which are blind to discrimination.

‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want’, Father, we pray for all who are starting a new school year, particularly those little ones going for the first time and those starting a new school or college. We ask, for teachers, parents and children that they may find a welcome, and overcome anxiety; and may this school year be one of joy and achievement, unmarred by lockdowns and illness. We pray too, for all those children throughout the world denied the benefits of education for various reasons.

‘Seek the peace and prosperity of the city’, Father, we pray for Penge and the surrounding district, and the well-being of its people. May those in authority govern wisely and efficiently; and those who care, be diligent and kind. May Christians in this area be salt and light to family, friends and neighbours, bringing help, joy and hope to all. We pray for our two churches and people, now officially joined as one – and we pray for Jessica Smith as she prepares to leave her present church and move to Penge in the next few weeks. Thank You for all You will do to further Your kingdom through her and us. As various church activities start up again, we give thanks, and ask for safety for all involved.

‘I was sick and You cared for me’, Father, we lift to You those in our church family who are ill, hurting, lonely or anxious. We name them quietly before You now..... Help them Father, to find reasons for thankfulness, and help all of us to know the deep joy of counting our blessings – that as we think of what You have done through Jesus, we can thank with grateful hearts.

‘My heart is filled with thankfulness, to Him who bore my pain
Who plumbed the depths of my disgrace, and gave me life again,
Who crushed my curse of sinfulness, and clothed me with His light,
and wrote His law of righteousness, with power upon my heart.

We ask all these prayers, Father, in the beautiful name of Your precious son, our Saviour, Jesus. Amen

Reading Luke 17.11-19

¹¹ Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy^[a] met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.

¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹ Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.”

Sermon

Our new sermon series is all about miracles by Jesus recorded in the gospels. When I hear these accounts, I'm filled with wonder at the divine power the miracles reveal, and fascinated by the emotions of joy that result for those who have faith in him, but also surprised by the fear and anger that Jesus provokes in some of the observers. Most of us hear one of the miracles and think 'How did he do it?' and perhaps 'Did he really do it? It's impossible!' Perhaps you're one of those who see every miracle quite simply, as a proof that Jesus is God and there's an end of it. Scripture cannot contain error so there's no need to think about what it shows. Or you might doubt whether it really happened just as the gospel says, wanting there to be no such thing as supernatural intervention, and think 'That person had a psychosomatic illness that Jesus healed by making them realise it', or 'There were convenient stepping stones just beneath the surface of the sea of Galilee when he walked on the water', but the point of miracles is that they teach, they reveal, but it's easy to miss out on a lot of the subtle messages that the gospel writers are telling us about Jesus, his ministry, and what God wants of us. Alternative useful questions might be 'Why did he do it?', 'Does this account have anything to do with the Old Testament?', and 'Why did the writer include those details in his account of what happened?'

These are stories full of wonder but there's more to them than the wonder alone, which I admit it's hard to get past. I'm one of the people who focuses on God's loving power when I hear one of these miracles, but the gospels are literary works, and each gospel writer has a distinct theological purpose, bringing out particular meanings, as they reveal aspects of Jesus' nature, ministry, and purpose.

Turning to our passage today, we are shown Jesus healing a leper, and it isn't the only account of such a healing – Luke includes another one earlier, in chapter 5 – raising the question: what is special about this healing so that he includes a second story about the same subject? This one features a Samaritan among those who are healed, and Luke is especially interested in Samaritans – his is the only gospel to include Jesus' teaching known as the parable of The Good Samaritan, where a Jewish priest and lay religious leader pass by on the other side of the road, leaving a severely wounded man to be helped by a Samaritan instead.

Samaritans, named after Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, were poorly regarded by Jews from the southern kingdom of Judah, centred on Jerusalem. When the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in the 8th century BC, its Israelite population was deported and the land was resettled with peoples from other parts of the Assyrian Empire, who brought their own religions with them, including their own worship centre near Samaria, equivalent and rival to the Temple in Jerusalem. While the southern Jews were 'cleansed' by exile in Babylon and returned to resettle after 70 years, this never happened in the north, so Samaritans were seen as 'unclean' in more than one way. They were foreigners, not part of God's chosen people, and they did not follow the Jewish religion established under Moses. In fact, the word for 'foreigner' used by Jesus in his final question: 'Did no one return to praise God except this foreigner?' was the one used on the barrier outside the Temple warning non-Israelites not to enter. Samaritans were excluded, and perceived as unfit for God's kingdom, the enemies of God's people. Not surprisingly, this led to violence and harassment of Jews travelling in Samaria and vice versa. The account begins

with Jesus travelling along the border between the two countries, a sign of the tension that existed, as Jews often went the long way round to stay away from Samaritan hostility.

The ten men who have leprosy are nine Jews and one Samaritan, but they are united because they have a bigger problem than worrying about the nationality or religious cleanness of each other. Their shared adversity of leprosy overcame the relatively feeble distinctions that divided and excluded Samaritans. They stood at a distance, because that was the law. It prevented infection, but it was also part of the religious law, which you can read in Leviticus 13: 'He must wear torn clothes, have unkempt hair, cover the lower part of his face and cry out 'Unclean, unclean!' As long as he has the infection, he remains unclean. He must live alone, outside the camp.' These men were outcasts in every sense, who had to be marked out as such and even had to signal to everyone else by their appearance and words: 'I'm unclean. Don't let me near you!' They were seen as punished by God, unfit to mix with decent people in the holy nation. In their horrible difficulties, they have faith. They call Jesus 'Master', accepting that he has power over their condition, power from God, the God who others saw as hating them, punishing them with leprosy.

The healing is not described by Luke – by chapter 17 it is 'a given' that they are healed. More important is Jesus' command to them 'Go, show yourself to the priests'. They set off, still lepers, and 'as they went, they were cleansed'. Notice again that it isn't 'they were healed' but the wording reminds us of their religious uncleanness, their exclusion – 'As they went, they were cleansed'. Perhaps if they hadn't believed they would be cured, and stayed where they were, they wouldn't have been healed. They set off in faith and receive the healing they crave.

The command by Jesus is the strange part. The Samaritan couldn't go to the Temple to show himself anyway – he was excluded from it as a non-Jew. The other nine had to go in order to be inspected by the priests, declared clean, and re-admitted, but they are blamed for doing what they'd been told to do, and had to do by law. Jesus says they didn't offer thanks and praise to God, unlike the Samaritan who came back to him to do so, but a thank-offering would certainly have been part of the process at the Temple. Another oddity is that all ten were cured but only the Samaritan is told 'Your faith has saved you'.

So why does Luke leave these illogical details in the story, unexplained? At the literal level this is all very strange, but theologically it has a clear message. God healed the men, but it isn't enough to thank God in a ritual at the Temple. God acted through Jesus, but Jesus isn't just some kind of faith healer, a channel or instrument for God's power – he is the embodiment of God's power, God incarnate. He exercises God's power on earth in direct relationship to those he meets. He can say 'Your faith has saved you' to this man because, although all of them acknowledge God and receive healing, he is the one who acknowledges Jesus and enters a new personal relationship with God in him. The non-Jew, so excluded, who is a leper, so even more excluded, is included in the kingdom of God when he says 'Jesus, Master, help me' and more importantly, 'praised God in a loud voice, and threw himself at Jesus' feet'. He is not ashamed to display his new loyalty to Jesus – notice the detail of the 'loud voice' – and he acts on his new welcome into the kingdom, throwing himself at Jesus' feet in gratitude.

The key point though is that it's the outsider, the one who seems rejected by God, who understands, responds, and is welcomed into the kingdom. This is true of other unclean

outsiders who appear in miracle stories: the centurion's servant, the Syro-Phoenician woman, another leper, a tax collector, and even corpses. All of these 'unclean' people, receive healing, receive Jesus, and receive a welcome in God's kingdom. This is a recurrent idea in the accounts of Jesus' miracles, which foretell Jesus' opening of the church to the Gentiles, our universal church.

At a simple level, the lepers knew that Jesus was their best hope, rather like a sufferer going to a specialist in a rare disease and telling him 'You're the only one who can help me!', which is obviously fine with Jesus. It is realistic. The Samaritan leper though goes further. He responds with spontaneous thankfulness and praise, which he expresses with great feeling. He doesn't look only to his need – he looks to our God who gives. When we teach children to say 'thank you', we know that they may not feel thankful when they say it, but we want them to grow a real spirit of gratitude, so that they don't become selfish and think everything is about them, as if the world is designed to make them happy. Perhaps you find yourself feeling preoccupied with your difficulties, looking inward too much, instead of the health-giving approach of looking outward to God, or others. Old advice is to 'count your blessings', and that's a great thing to do. Literally, think of the reasons you have to be thankful – you might have to force yourself to do so, at first anyway – and as you count the reasons for thanksgiving, it eventually creates thanksgiving. We can become like the Samaritan leper. God has shown sacrificial love to us, and we can offer worship to God, just as that man did. We can do this as a daily habit, a training of the mind and heart, but we can also grasp how it is enacted in communion. We offer a sacrifice of worship, praise and thankfulness to God for his gift to us, for Jesus' sacrifice, because we are giving something back in response to the cross. When we do, we receive again new life, just as that healed leper did.

A Final Blessing

God of our salvation,
you have restored us to life,
you have brought us back again into your love
by the triumphant death and resurrection of Christ.
Continue to heal us,
as we go to live and work
in the power of your Spirit,
to your praise and glory.