

Readings for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

9th October 2022

First Reading: Jeremiah 29:1,4-7

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David – that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. The saying is sure: if we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.

Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

Gospel: St Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to Samaritan, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

A Reflection for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Some years ago, my mother gave me Victoria Hislop's book *The Island* for my birthday. It's not a book I would have chosen for myself but I was fascinated by it. The island of the title is Spinalonga, off the coast of Crete, which was Greece's last leper colony, only closing as recently as 1957. Based on a true story, so I understand, the book tells of

a family, living in the nearby village of Plaka, torn apart by leprosy as first the mother and then, many years later, one of her daughters, contract the disease and are exiled to the island. The real fear of leprosy in the community comes through clearly as they see the tell-tale patches of discoloured skin.

Leprosy has always seemed to me like a disease of long ago, but it's not. It starts with this discoloured skin which is indicative of nerve damage and leads on to more serious disfigurement. It has been treatable with antibiotics since the 1950s. Nevertheless, it is still found across much of South and Central America, Africa and Asia – in 2018 more than 200,000 people were diagnosed with leprosy worldwide- and there is still a lot of stigma associated with it.

Stigma and fear certainly characterised the response to leprosy in Biblical times too, and understandably so as there was little understanding of its transmission or control. The Jewish Law had detailed and complex regulations to try to protect the community, and lepers, like the group in today's Gospel reading, were social outcasts. Their disease was seen as a shameful punishment for wrongdoing and they were often treated cruelly. So these lepers kept their distance and shouted on the outskirts of the village, a warning to people not to come near, but also an attempt to stir the compassion of the people to provide them with food and other necessities of life.

And yet, there is something different here. Luke starts this passage by telling us that Jesus, along with his companions, was 'on the way to Jerusalem'. This whole section of Luke's Gospel, that we have been reading from for quite a number of weeks, has as its setting this journey from Galilee to Jerusalem where Jesus would be crucified. 'On the way to Jerusalem' sets this story in the context of the Cross with its rejection and shame, something the lepers would have understood well, but also its triumphal resurrection and hope of new life.

Did this group of lepers see something different in Jesus? Or had they seen him somewhere before, perhaps performing some miracle, and therefore gained a heightened sense of expectation of what he might do? They address him as 'Master', something that should surprise us as this title for Jesus is only used a few times in the New Testament. And they ask him to have mercy on them. Is this a glimmer of a spiritual understanding of who Jesus is? Perhaps.

Jesus' inclusiveness of the poor, the outcast and the oppressed, is one of the themes of Luke's Gospel. Here, he didn't offer them food or money as they might normally have expected or hoped for. Instead, he told them to go and show themselves to the priests. The significance of this is that it was the priests who could certify that they were no longer 'contaminated' by the disease, so allowing their restoration to community life. But it must have seemed a strange instruction; after all, they had leprosy. However, Jesus was the agent of God's mercy, and the mercy they received on their way to the priests was far greater than they could ever have hoped or asked for.

All ten received God's mercy, but only one turned back to Jesus. However, this is not intended as a lesson in good manners or gratitude. Only one saw the real significance of what had happened and only he received the full extent of the mercy that Jesus offered and praised God. All ten were cleansed of disease but only this one came into a restored relationship with God.

This man was a Samaritan, so he would have been doubly outcast by the Jews. In Luke's Gospel, it is often those who are most shunned by the community who were most likely to recognise Jesus' divinity and power. Jesus tells him to get up, to rise in some translations – commentators note that the word used is the same as for resurrection. He tells

him to go on his way – that is to follow God’s way. And he tells him that his faith has made him well – ‘well’ here signifying more than healing from illness but also his renewed relationship with God.

This account comes after a passage in which the disciples have asked Jesus to increase their faith and Jesus’ teaching that faith as small as a mustard seed was powerful enough to uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the sea. In this story of the lepers, we have an example of faith enough to make the man ‘well’ in all senses of that word. Over the summer, we had quite a lot of readings about our Christian attitudes, and during the Season of Creation, we have thought a lot about our response to God’s call on our lives in how we act. Underpinning both our attitudes and our actions is our faith in God and God’s promises.

Our other readings today also have something to say to us about faith. Paul, in his letter to Timothy, is suffering hardship, a reminder that faithfulness can be painful at times, but it is faith that helps us through. Christ’s death and resurrection show solidarity with those who are suffering, and give hope of resurrection and salvation in Christ.

In the reading from Jeremiah, the prophet addresses the exiles in Babylon. A long way from home, against their will, their response might well have been resistance or even rebellion. But Jeremiah urges them to take the long view, to settle down and build houses, plant gardens and raise families, even to pray for the peace and welfare of the land they have come to so unwillingly. He reminds them to trust God, that justice will come in God’s time and meanwhile, they are to be salt and light in the place they find themselves. He calls on them, and us, to keep faith in God’s larger plan, which may seem humanly impossible but is possible for God.

God longs for us to have complete faith in him, to build and continue to strengthen a trusting relationship with him. He is eager to renew and restore, and to bring wholeness, so much so that he took the initiative in sending Jesus. So, on those occasions when we are touched by God’s grace, the story of the lepers reminds and challenges us to respond wholeheartedly, to do more than simply say thank you; to seek God and offer glory to him, in doing so deepening our faith and our relationship with God.