

2 Kings 5:1-14

5 Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy.^[a] **2** Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. **3** She said to her mistress, 'If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.'^[b] **4** So Naaman^[c] went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. **5** And the king of Aram said, 'Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.'

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. **6** He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, 'When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.'^[d] **7** When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?'^[e] Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.'

8 But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, 'Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.' **9** So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. **10** Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, 'Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.' **11** But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, 'I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!'^[f] **12** Are not Abana^[g] and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?' He turned and went away in a rage. **13** But his servants approached and said to him, 'Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, "Wash, and be clean"?' **14** So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

1 Cor 9:24-27

24 Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. **25** Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we an imperishable one. **26** So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; **27** but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

Mark 1:40-45

40 A leper^[a] came to him begging him, and kneeling^[b] he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.' **41** Moved with pity,^[c] Jesus^[d] stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' **42** Immediately the leprosy^[e] left him, and he was made clean. **43** After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, **44** saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.' **45** But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus^[f] could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

We all know Jesus heals. He was crowded with people bringing those who needed healing wherever he went when he was on earth. And I hope you know he heals now too. Who here has been healed in response to prayer or even just known his healing when you were aware of God's active presence without a specific prayer?

Last week's Gospel passage was about Jesus healing – first Peter's mother-in-law, then 'all the sick and demon possessed' in Capernaum, and then after seeking some early morning space to pray, Jesus began his preaching and healing tour of the villages of Galilee. And then today's reading is also a healing story.

Why does Mark include this one in particular? Isn't this just another healing of an un-named person? What is it about this leper that makes telling this story separately important for Mark?

To understand this first I think we need to look at what was involved with having a skin disease at that time. This is covered in Leviticus chapter 13 in the Torah. This is very specific material, most of which deals with skin diseases and how the priests are to distinguish between things which are not serious skin diseases and things which are serious skin diseases which preclude you from being able to come into the assembly of God's people within the camp, and which preclude you from coming into the tabernacle to worship the Lord. The priest would declare a person 'clean' or 'unclean'. If the person was seen by the priest to have recovered they were declared 'clean' again and required to offer specific sacrifices in a quite elaborate way.

Now, the skin diseases here that are mentioned are all sorts: all the way from less dangerous things (eczema), wounds and boils, up to leprosy, or Hansen's disease. This description of various types of skin diseases runs the whole gamut. Though the specific disease that we call leprosy, Hansen's disease, is included within the types of skin diseases that can make a person unclean; it is not the only thing that is being spoken about when the word leprosy was being used. Leprosy was the generic term that could refer to many different kinds of skin diseases, so when you see leprosy there, don't just think of a person who has

contracted Hansen's disease. As you can tell, even if you're not a physician or a dermatologist, this passage refers to many more things other than just Hansen's disease, leprosy.

But at any rate, the main interest here is not primarily medical. The priest, though he may be a divine dermatologist here, is primarily interested in these dermatological problems because of the ritual or ceremonial significance. It's ritual impurity that's the concern. You see, a scaly skin disease was a visible sign that something was physically wrong with a person, and in some cases the physical problem was serious enough that it caused the person to be declared ceremonially unclean, unable to come into the presence of the Lord and His people.

Disease and decay indicated a state of ill health, the state of a person less than whole, a disease, a contamination that is incompatible with the presence of the Lord, and therefore the person was declared ceremonially unclean. Sickness was considered a result of sin so even recovering from it required sacrifices for atonement from sin.

This relates to the Kingdom of God, the realm in which God reigns. Where God reigns there is no sickness or sin, nothing wrong. When Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God is present in himself he is declaring that in himself God is putting all things right. So what Jesus does is not just deal with sin as some sort of legal debt. When he proclaims the Kingdom of God, he teaches about how to live right and he deals with sickness which is also not right.

Let's look at what is involved in this presence of the Kingdom of God in this healing and then in the other healings Mark outlines in his gospel. In this healing the leper had some sort of long term skin disease that meant he would have been living away from people and unable to take part in any social or religious activity. But he comes in faith, expressing that he knows Jesus can make him clean, (If you are willing, you have the power to make me clean) that is not just healed of his sickness but actually able to be accepted again in society, to be able to be in relationship with people again. Jesus reaction is actually very strong – not just 'moved with pity'. The word *embrimaomai* expresses great distaste or anger. Jesus is strongly against both the wrongness of the man's

sickness but also the wrongness of the man's isolation, the social wrongness. And so Jesus heals him. The man does not obey his stern warning not to tell anyone and so Jesus is restricted from going through the towns he would want to.

In each of the healings in Mark's gospel he brings out different aspects of Jesus bringing God's Kingdom presence, putting things right. In this one it is not just the wrongness of sickness that is put right but also the wrongness of social isolation, of being unable to relate with people. In Mark 1:21-28 which was our reading 2 weeks ago Jesus' first clash with the wrongness of the world was in casting out an unclean spirit with his word of authority. God's Kingdom presence in Jesus does not allow evil spirits to have any bodily place of influence in the world, to take over minds. In Mark 1:29-31 read last week Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law of fever and she is immediately able to serve him. Here the presence of the Kingdom of God leads to physical healing so that someone can resume the normal things of life, preparing food for guests, being set free to serve freely.

In Mark 2 when a paralysed man is brought to Jesus he tells the man his sins are forgiven as well as demonstrating that forgiveness by healing him. The presence of God's Kingdom in Jesus leads to the restoration of righteousness, spiritual wholeness as well as physical wholeness.

The next healing that is described in Mark is that of a man with a shriveled hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus demonstrates that it is right to do what is right on the Sabbath; it is just and lawful. The healing illustrates the justice Jesus brings with the presence of the Kingdom of God.

In all this healing ministry of Jesus he is doing what Mark describes him doing in summary at the beginning – proclaiming the good news of God – the presence of God's Kingdom. In these healings he is doing this in actions not just words. And he is demonstrating clearly that healing is not just about physical wholeness. The wholeness that is brought about by God's Kingdom presence putting things right in the world is wholeness in body, and mind, but also it is

relational wholeness, it includes spiritual wholeness and the freedom to be able to do what is right, eg serve others or to do what is just and lawful. Jesus doesn't just teach what is the right way to live but also enables people to live like that by setting them free from all that is wrong.

Jesus proclaims 'The Kingdom of God has come near' and calls all to turn away from the wrong in the world and to trust this good news that comes in him. And then he commissions his disciples to proclaim this too in word and action. That includes us if we too have turned away from the world and begun to trust in him.

I hope all this is pretty obvious to us here.

But how do we do this? How do we follow Jesus in this? In general terms we look at what is not right in this world and especially in people's lives – the lives of the people we meet or encounter every day. Do you see this? Think about what is not right in someone's life you know right now. And if you can't think of anyone immediately are you isolating yourself from the world rather than being a follower of Jesus in his world.? And then where we see sickness in mind or body, where we see social isolation, where we see injustice, wherever we see people not free to be and do all that God made them to be – ie everywhere – our role is to proclaim God's Kingdom in word and action. But be clear – this is not about us putting things right as well as we can – this is about us bringing God's presence who will put things right – about consciously bringing Jesus and his Spirit's power to right the wrongs around us.

There is so much here I could refer to so I just want to return to today's passage to look at some of what Jesus involves here. When Jesus heard the leper's request he was full of anger at the wrongness present; he was indignant that such sickness and such relational isolation was part of this man's life. Do we love those we meet with such a love? Do we have such a distaste for all that is wrong in people's lives, for all that prevents people from being free to be all that God made them to be? The next thing he did was reach out and touch the leper. This

act supposedly made Jesus too 'unclean' but instead it broke the power of his social isolation. We too are to touch the unlovely, reach out socially to the 'unclean' in our society, to be, like Jesus, people who engage and connect with others no matter who they are, while we also share that God wants to make all things right through Jesus. Then Jesus healed the man. When we encounter sickness of any form our prayer is for healing in the name of Jesus.

This life of proclaiming God's Kingdom presence not only involves our words and actions but starts with our prayer. Today we are going to begin our prayer with the song which you may sing if you know it or just pray as you listen – Beauty for brokenness.

Beauty for brokenness
 Hope for despair
 Lord, in the suffering
 This is our prayer
 Bread for the children
 Justice, joy, peace
 Sunrise to sunset
 Your kingdom increase!

Shelter for fragile lives
 Cures for their ills
 Work for the craftsman
 Trade for their skills
 Land for the dispossessed
 Rights for the weak
 Voices to plead the cause
 Of those who can't speak

*God of the poor
 Friend of the weak
 Give us compassion we pray
 Melt our cold hearts
 Let tears fall like rain
 Come, change our love
 From a spark to a flame*

Refuge from cruel wars
 Havens from fear
 Cities for sanctuary

Freedoms to share
 Peace to the killing-fields
 Scorched earth to green
 Christ for the bitterness
 His cross for the pain

Rest for the ravaged earth
 Oceans and streams
 Plundered and poisoned
 Our future, our dreams
 Lord, end our madness
 Carelessness, greed
 Make us content with
 The things that we need

Lighten our darkness
 Breathe on this flame
 Until your justice
 Burns brightly again
 Until the nations
 Learn of your ways
 Seek your salvation
 And bring you their praise