

Outsiders become Insiders

a sermon preached on the

2nd Sunday before Lent

Sunday 15 February 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lection: 2 Kings 5:1-14; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

All the Jesus healing stories, including those involving the demonic as we considered last Sunday, put us in touch with a very ordinary, basic and presumably-universal aspect of our humanity. Simply put, does this healing power offer relief for me, or those for whom I have concern? Only a moment's reflection on this question reveals that the question itself is fundamentally self-centred – can the Divine power change my reality according to what I want? Thus, the promise of healing miracles, like the promise of tax cuts, always attracts our attention, draws large crowds, and galvanises tribal identity. We should not be surprised about this. Any of us being honest with ourselves will be able to admit to at least one moment in our lives when we prayed that the conditions of the cosmos might be interfered with in order to be bent according to our desire. This fact ought to alert us to the blind alley which we are inclined to run down in our interpretation of Scripture's healing stories.

The benchmark story with respect to the dynamic of prayer is the account of Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. We recall that though he desires that the cup of suffering be taken away from him, nevertheless he surrenders what he desires for himself to a larger purpose.¹ This conscious and free willingness to let go of that which he wants for himself is fundamental to the way of Jesus, and by definition also the way for those baptised into Jesus.

With this fundamental spiritual principle in sight, then, it should be clear that the healing stories in the gospels must not be interpreted to mean that a person who follows Jesus can get what they want, even if it does mean the alleviation of suffering, even if that alleviation itself is a worthwhile goal. The healing stories must not be interpreted to mean that the laws of physics and biology and so on are violated by God for particular persons who meet certain criteria. What, then, is the meaning and purpose of these stories so integral to the gospel?

The key to understanding these stories is the religious purity system. We recall that the basic religious intuition is the possibility of relationship with the Divine, which seems always to begin with the assumption that the Divine has demands which must be met in order to secure relationship. This is not surprising, since this is the small child's perspective on the world – I assume that mummy and daddy will find me acceptable, loveable, so long as I please them. Thus, religious systems always seem to develop some kind of purity code, a complex of practices, rituals and beliefs, the keeping of which guarantees the individual's acceptability before God, and thus inclusion in the tribe.

In the Palestine of Jesus the purity code was advanced and sophisticated, drawing on many centuries of traditions, administered by the religious elites, especially the Pharisees, but always serving the needs of a significant proportion of the population. A faithful Jewish person who adhered to the purity code had a great deal to gain, so we should not make the mistake (as I suspect we do) of assuming that this is simply Pharisee self-interest. Like all systems, including our modern systems of democracy, capitalism and science, a class of persons administering the system is essential, but they are not the only ones benefiting from it – in our case, the majority of us have a vested interest in these systems being maintained by others. The wonderful thing about the purity system, if you're on the inside, is that it clearly delineates who is an insider, and who is an outsider – which seems to be an abiding human concern. So in the religious-cultural system of Jewish Palestine the sophisticated purity system protected the vested interests of a great many people.

¹

Mark 14:36

The corollary should be obvious – the same system guarantees that others’ interests are systematically violated. In Jewish Palestine of the first century BCE the purity system guaranteed that entire classes of persons were excluded from the main stream of life, and thus from ‘salvation’. Anyone who could not fulfil the elaborate, time-consuming and expensive, provisions of the purity code was, by definition, classed as an outsider. The list is very long – not only gentiles, but also women because of their blood flow, persons with any kind of disease or ailment, including the blind, the crippled, the deaf, the dumb, anyone with any kind of skin disorder, and groups such as shepherds, because they could not get to the Temple to meet the ritual offering requirements, and of course groups such as prostitutes, tax collectors, soldiers and criminals. The greatest benefit to the insiders is that onto all such outsiders could be projected the unacknowledged and repressed darkness of the insiders – the seemingly-universal scapegoat mechanism. Perhaps we may recognise the same dynamic at work in our world also?

All of the healing stories in the gospels need to be heard against that religious-political backdrop. To even be within a certain distance from a leper was to immediately be rendered unclean oneself! Thus, when Mark says that a leper came to Jesus and knelt down before him Mark’s first hearers immediately understood the enormity of what was going on – Jesus willingly made himself unclean, according to the standards of the purity system. And when Mark tells disciples that “moved with gut-turning compassion,² Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper” this spells an effective death sentence on Jesus.

So it should be clear that what’s going on here is a no-holds-barred, full-frontal assault on the purity system. The very structure of religious-cultural life is being challenged, for without the certainty which the purity system provides, insiders’ privilege and power go up in a puff of smoke. Outsiders become insiders. On this matter Jesus proves to be a faithful prophet of Israel, for all his great prophetic forebears have also shown that outsiders may be insiders, as we have heard in today’s story of Naaman the Syrian army commander. It is because of this attack on the purity system that all persons of privilege, not just Pharisees, combine forces against Jesus to murder him.

So here’s the twist inherent to the Gospel. Those guaranteed status as insiders according to the purity system imagine that the leprous person is possessed by a demon, but the real demon, according to the religious imagination and prophetic action of Jesus, is the purity system itself. It is not the person who is sick and suffering, the person who is bleeding, the person who is too poor to pay for the complicated and expensive offering rituals, who is possessed by a demon. Rather, it is the purity system which makes of some people outsiders while comforting others as insiders which is possessed by a demon.

This is the shock and the liberation of the gospels – precisely that which makes them ‘good news’ – with which, to be honest, we Christians continue to stumble over. It is not the various classes of persons which the churches have excluded and at times persecuted – witches, women, Jews, gypsies, coloured persons, homosexuals – who are possessed by demons. Rather, according to Jesus, it is the religious structures themselves which so exclude and persecute that are in fact demon-possessed. When Jesus tells the formerly-leprous man to “show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded” this is not an endorsement of the purity system – for the Greek reveals his motive: “as a testimony *against* them.” This is rubbing it in their faces!

The true healing, the true miracle, truly gospel, then, is the re-defining of the relationship with God – outsiders become insiders!

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

2

Mark 1:41 The word translated in the NRSV as ‘moved with pity’ is from the verb *σπλαγνίζομαι* *splagnizomai*, ‘to eat the inner parts’.