

Matthew 8

Verses 1-4

Be Clean

30.07.2006

Leprosy... to many it is a disease which affects people in places like India. Not many would realise that even here in Australia, leprosy still lingers on, and that there has been a leper colony in Sydney.

But in the Bible, leprosy was a major scourge, which afflicted most if not all towns and cities. In Leviticus 13, a very detailed description is given for diagnosing leprosy. It may well be that leprosy included other types of skin diseases, but one thing is certain:-

If someone was diagnosed by the Jewish priests as having leprosy, that person was treated as if dead. As soon as it was diagnosed, the person was classed as a leper. That person was then banished from society, and remained unclean as long as the disease remained. Lepers were forced by Law to live outside the villages. Their clothes had to remain ripped open, their hair very messy, and their upper lip had to be covered. Travelling along, or when anyone came near, they had to yell out "Unclean, Unclean."

In the Middle Ages, this attitude led to a priest, when faced with a person apparently getting leprosy, took the person into church and read the funeral service over them.

In Palestine, in the time of Jesus, the leper was banned from entering Jerusalem, and from all walled towns. In their Law, there were 61 different contacts which could defile, and the defilement involved in contacting a leper was second only to the defilement involved in touching a dead body. If a leper so much as put a head inside a house, then the house became unclean up to the roof beams.

Even in the open it was illegal to greet a leper. No one was to go closer than two metres to a leper. If the wind was blowing, they had to stand more than 50 metres from a clean person. In Jewish writings, one Rabbi boasted that he threw stones at lepers to keep them away. Others ran away whenever they saw a leper.

Leprosy was the only disease that the Bible says could not be cured, except by God. No-one is cured from leprosy, rather they are cleansed from it. Maybe that's why Naaman was told by Elijah to go wash in the Jordan seven times. Leviticus 14 gives regulations for how a priest pronounced someone clean (not cured).

Leprosy was the disease that really separated people from others.

Yet coming down from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was followed by a huge crowd. They'd heard him speak. They knew he had marvellous abilities, but straight away, a "dead-man walking" blocked his way.

He had begun the Sermon with "*Blessed are the...*" and had pointed out the truly blessed by God. Yet now in front of him was one considered by everyone as cursed.

His sermon had said that the ways of the Pharisees were a sham, and unless our righteousness is greater than theirs, we won't enter heaven; yet in front of him stood someone who could make you unclean and rob you of opportunities to join in the feasts of the righteous.

He had said "*Listen to me, follow me, and build your life on my teaching*", and now someone filthy, diseased, cursed and rejected wanted help.

& the leper took a risk. He knew he could not get so near to the crowd, yet in the crowd was Jesus. So he came and knelt before him, saying "*Lord if you choose, you can make me clean.*"

If you choose to... I know you can, but will you? You have the power, but do you have the mercy? You have the gift, but is it drenched in love?

I often think that this prayer is a prayer of faith. It recognises that Jesus can do anything, yet in humility it ably allows God's will to be done. Sometimes prayers can be too arrogant. It is almost as if we accept that God can do anything,

Matthew 8

Verses 1-4

Be Clean

30.07.2006

and that He delights in answering prayers, so we demand that He deliver his answer now!

It is good to realise and accept God's ability and character as revealed in the Bible. Like our collects in the prayer book, we can say "God, this is what you are like, so therefore please..." Yet sometimes we can get overconfident and say since God is like this, He has no choice but to do our bidding.

But whether from a clear faith, or from being rejected too much, the leper had the humility to let God be God. He asked, yet asked in such a way that acknowledged that God can, but may not answer with a yes.

And the delight of the event was that Jesus did say yes.

But the delight for us was scandalous for them. For some of the most shocking words of the New Testament are recorded here.

"Jesus stretched out his hand, and touched him..."

Surely the crowd would have all stepped away! Jaws would drop!

How could he?! Now Jesus was unclean... nice thought, silly action.

His zeal to comfort had meant religious impurity. Now Jesus would have to visit the priests and offer the right sacrifices to be cleaned.

But surprisingly, something happened. The man did not make Jesus unclean. Jesus made the leper clean.

Clean skin again. Acceptance again. Society open, blessings coming from God again. Jesus had the power and the authority to make him clean, and chose to do so.

But even though the man was clean, it was not good enough to simply burst back into society. He had to go to the priest to show that he was clean, and then to offer the correct offerings. That was not simply for his own sake. Jesus told

him *"See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."*

Yes, it would mean he could be reinstated, but it would also be a testimony to the priests. What sort of testimony? As he explained to the priests what had happened, the priests would have seen the loving power of Jesus. The fact that leprosy was cleansed, would've been startling, so startling that they would have begun to question who Jesus was.

To the crowd, Jesus was amazing. To the leper Jesus was his Lord who saved him and cleansed him. To the priests, Jesus was a puzzle.

Who is he to you?

I pray that like the leper, Jesus is your Lord and saviour.

If not, then I pray that like the leper, you'll come in boldness and humility and ask Jesus to clean up your life.