

On the eve of World War Two, the British government produced a series of posters whose purpose was to convey a reassuring message from King George the sixth to his people. Intended for distribution only in the event of an invasion, the poster was never actually issued. However, in the early 1990s an original copy was discovered in a box of old leaflets by the owners of Barter Books, a large second-hand bookstore based in Northumberland (and one I used to frequent). It proved so popular with customers that a facsimile has gone on to become a best seller along with many derivatives. The poster is a classic of design with the Crown logo and a simple, clear message, "Keep Calm and Carry On"

Wartime saw many other popular phrases spring up that are well known. "Careless Talk Costs Lives"; "Dig For Victory"; and "Coughs and sneezes spread diseases". Indeed, this latter one is still very much in use in hospitals and doctors' waiting rooms throughout Britain and I suspect here also. Sometimes we seem to get preoccupied with hygiene to an obsessive level – levels that would have been unheard of a few years ago. Every time you go into or out of a room at hospital, you are expected to use the hand sanitiser to prevent the spread of infection.

We are walking with Jesus in the final months of his life, toward Jerusalem. For many months he has crossed Israel preaching the gospel of the Kingdom, doing many miracles and healings, showing compassion and sympathy, tenderness and mercy but also speaking firmly about judgment, to awaken the people to the necessity of looking to Him as their Saviour. It's near Samaria that he encounters ten lepers: ten outcasts; ten people with the equivalent of AIDS and ebola all rolled into one.

Lepers were, of all the sick, the ones most avoided. That's why we're told they stood at a distance. They are under a sentence of death - no one will come near them - no one will touch them - no one will even touch their clothing and their eating utensils. By the rules of their society, rules created because of the fear of contamination, lepers were forced to live apart from everyone else, and on those occasions when they drew near to others for one reason or other, they rang little bells to announce their presence and to warn others to stand off. What must that've been like? Have you ever been isolated from family or other people? Such as being in the military and posted overseas, without your family? Or, moved to a different community where you knew no one? Or, went away to university for the first time and all was new and different? If so, you have the beginnings of a sense of the isolation leprosy brought.

In the ancient world they didn't know about bacteria, antibiotics, rates of infection, or any of that but what they did understand was that sometimes what starts out as a simple rash on the skin, can lead to disaster, and what starts with one person can end up affecting many more which is why they separated the lepers from other people, and didn't let them live with anyone or eat with anyone, or even talk with anyone, except for other lepers. It could cost you your family and friends and life as you know it is gone. The people you needed most, the loving family and friends, you couldn't come near. You couldn't associate with other people in the synagogue or any social environment whatsoever. You were an alien from all of life.

And there were rules to make all this happen as set out in the Book of Leviticus: laws about how far away lepers had to stand from other people, about how they had to wear worn-out clothes and warn people in a loud voice whenever they were walking down the street, and people at Jesus' time believed that leprosy was the punishment for sin, something the leper had done to deserve this fate so they tended to be very unsympathetic. These were the most miserable of all people, believing that they had been cursed by man and cursed by God as well.

It is against this background that Jesus demonstrates compassion, sympathy, and power and in doing so, challenges and undoes what the people would have assumed was a divine curse. It is a powerful indication of the Kingdom at work: the old order is passing away and, for those willing to see it, there is a new future. It is an astounding and incredible healing from all perspectives.

As Jesus enters a village ten lepers approach him and, mindful of the rules of their society which stated that they must stand at least 50 yards off, they call out to Jesus from a distance: "Jesus, Master, Have Mercy On Us."

Jesus does respond but he does so in a most unusual manner. Rather than saying (as he had said to others) "be healed", Jesus responds to their cry by saying - "go and show yourselves to the priests". This was because lepers were not allowed in the temple since they were regarded as "unclean". If cured, however, the

leper could gain re-admission to the temple and to the rest of society, if he was ritually purified and certified as "clean" by a priest. Still, Jesus' command to the ten lepers is a bit confusing. They have asked for mercy - they have asked to be healed. But Jesus does nothing for them but tell them to go and act as if they are healed - to go and present themselves to the priests as if they were whole, healed, accepted, living people.

Yet, despite the unusual response of Jesus - despite the possible confusion in understanding what Jesus is about, they go, and as they go - as they walk down the path towards the priests in the village they *are* healed.

As we know - one of the ten - a Samaritan man upon realizing he has been made clean, turns back and praising God with a loud voice he comes up Jesus and prostrates himself, he falls on his knees and his face before Jesus's feet, and thanks him. And Jesus looks upon him - and he says something very strange - and very important to his disciples. After noting the absence of the nine, he says to the man: 'Get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well.'" The word for well that is used here in the Greek can be used to mean "healed" - but also means to be made *whole* or to be *saved*.

We all know, or ought to know, that faith makes us whole. That is a basic tenet of our teaching. But here, in this story, we have the opportunity to see faith in a different light than we might normally see it. We have the opportunity to see faith as something that leads us to a life that is *more* than normal. And we have the opportunity to see faith as nothing more difficult and as nothing more profound as remembering what God has done and giving thanks to him for it.

What, after all, is the difference between the nine lepers who are made clean and the tenth leper who is not only made clean, but made whole? Between the nine who go to the priests as commanded and the one who returns to Jesus praising God and thanking Jesus for healing him?

The difference is that one of the healed lepers, the Samaritan, realizes *real* resurrection. He alone comes back to say "Thanks". He realizes that his healing comes from God and that God has put him in a relationship to Jesus - and that relationship alone has made him whole and alive again. All that the other nine wanted out of Jesus was to be made well, to go back home and start all over again, and who would blame them? But that one Samaritan comes back not only cured, but saved, made whole. He was saved and accepted by Jesus while he was a leper, while he was still sick, while he was untouchable, before he got well.

What happened to the nine is, of course, speculation. We don't know what became of them but it is Jesus who invites us to speculate; it was he who asked, "Were not ten made clean? Where are the other nine?" What could have happened to them? Luke doesn't give us an answer, so the question remains, hanging. It is up to the reader to wonder, to imagine, to speculate, to guess.

When we hear Jesus ask, "Where are the other nine?" I think we tend to hear a tone of judgement and criticism in his voice, as in, "Where are the other nine? They should be here!" But I can't help wondering if it was more a deep sense of compassion that led Jesus to ask that question. "Where are the other nine? I wanted their healing to lead to a life of wholeness." I find that interesting because the nine clearly had faith - they called out to Jesus to be healed and they were: it wasn't faith that they lacked so what went wrong?

Nine lepers got healed, one got saved. Nine people go away from Jesus healed, but not saved, because they put their lives as lepers, as outcasts, as dead people, behind them. They go in obedience most certainly, but they go in a hurry, anxious to be on with it, to begin living like everyone lives. They go away unsaved because all they really want is a normal life - a life like that they have dreamed of, a life like that which they had before they became lepers, - a life like everyone else's. But the tenth leper - he is not in such a hurry to forget how bad it was - he's not in such a hurry to get a normal life. He realizes something important. He realizes that the hand of God has touched his life; that Jesus has accepted him - as he accepted the other nine.

And the Samaritan realizes this - he realizes how unusual, how out of the ordinary, how exceptional this is, and he gives thanks to God, and to Jesus for it; and his acknowledgement of this fact - his Thanksgiving - is called faith by Jesus, a faith that saves. What a shame to have met Jesus, the Lord and Giver of Life, to have met the one who loves to eat and drink with sinners and to worship in the synagogues and in the temple and to pray alone on the mountain tops and in the wilderness, and to then come away from that meeting with nothing more than our health; with nothing more than normal.

The power of salvation, of wholeness, is in remembering our previous state; how we were enslaved by the powers of despair, darkness, and death, and seeing the miracle of what we have now - of seeing that God has acted and is still acting and rejoicing and being glad in it.

Our faith is not about how to live a normal life, It is about how God touches us and Christ embraces us, and raises not only that which was dead to new life, but transforms that which was ordinary into the blessedness of the more than normal, the blessedness of knowing that God's hand and God's heart is in each and every moment of each and every new day.

God, through Jesus Christ does not just make us well, but makes us whole.