

## Preaching Points

### Jesus and the Leper

Mark 1:40-45

The gospel narrative of Jesus and the leper enables us to enter into the personal story of one man whose life had been destroyed by a chronic medical condition. The supplementary notes to CBM's Annual Campaign *Good Health, Hopeful Living* emphasize that the words disease and illness can be used in different ways. Disease is the biomedical condition that weakens the body and may eventually lead to death. The term illness is used in a broader manner to describe the psycho-social impact of a disease. Illness may include factors of mental health, household economics, family relationships and one's position in the community.

The leper in the gospel narrative had both a disease and an illness. His medical condition would probably be known as Hansen's Disease by doctors in our time.<sup>1</sup> Leprosy was feared. There were no effective herbal medicines or ointments. The illness was worse than the disease. Someone who saw the first signs of leprosy was obligated to show his or her skin condition to a local priest. The priest had the power to pronounce the feared words: "You are a leper!" The person identified as a leper was a threat to the health and the ritual purity of the community. There could be no contact with lepers. They were forced to leave home, family, work and community. Lepers banded together living in garbage dumps or caves. On the roads they were forced to protect other travellers by standing aside at a distance and shouting: "Unclean! Unclean!"

The narrative is shocking. We need to feel its scandalous nature in order to understand its meaning.

1. A leper dares to invade the space of a healthy man (Jesus).
2. Jesus does not react by sending him away. People concerned about their ritual purity, health and honor (reputation) did not allow lepers to be in their presence.
3. The leper makes a statement of faith which is also a question: "If you choose, you can make me clean." He does not question Jesus' power. He doubts that Jesus will break from the social norms and values of first century Palestine.
4. Jesus reacts emotionally. Note the textual issue in Mark 1:41. Some manuscripts read that Jesus was moved with compassion meaning that he identified with the man's painful situation. Other Greek manuscripts state that Jesus became angry. This reading implies that he saw leprosy as an evil force that distorted God's intention for this man and his family.
5. Jesus touches the leper and heals him. Why did he touch the leper?
6. Jesus instructs him to return home, present the appropriate sacrifices and reintegrate into his family and community. He has acted to restore the man to a full and meaningful live.

<sup>1</sup> The word "leprosy" in the Old and New Testaments could refer to a number of skin disorders. The incidence of Hansen's Disease in Palestine increased after Alexander the Great returned from India bringing fresh strains of the infection.

The story connects with our personal stories at various levels.

- Each and every person can identify with the leper. There are times when we feel separated from God and isolated from others due to circumstances, words or actions.
- God's intention is for people to live full and meaningful lives in relationship with him, their families and their communities.
- Evil can be understood more broadly as personal sin. Evil is any force or human action that distorts or destroys God's intention for a person to live a full and meaningful life. The increased prevalence of infectious diseases among the poor is caused by the evil power of illness along with the human evils of injustice and lack of compassion for those who live in the margins.
- God never sends us away in our time of need. He is not embarrassed to identify with us. He touches the deepest needs in our lives.
- One aspect of the mission of the church is to act as the body of Christ in the world, by touching lepers and witnessing to God's grace in restoring lives. Your participation in CBM's Annual Campaign *Good Health, Hopeful Living* is a meaningful way to come alongside women and men in poverty who are threatened by evil forces that cause death.

A story from the life of St. Francis of Assisi can be inspiring in regard to the mission of the church. As a young man, Francis had hoped to establish his reputation on the field of battle. However, in a dream he was told not to value the things of the world. He began to read the gospels and spend time in seclusion for prayer. One day, Francis was riding his horse when a leper suddenly appeared on the road. Francis rode away but was troubled by his fear. He returned to the leper, dismounted, embraced the man, kissed his lips and gave him money. In the following days he visited a leper colony where he ate with the lepers, asked for their forgiveness and cared for their needs. He later wrote that his experience with lepers was an important part of his conversion to Christ.

Serving God in our current day means not running from the wounds of the world, but witnessing through our actions and words that God's love reaches into the deepest of human pain.