EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 13.09.2019 LUKE 17.11-19

## Jesus was journeying to Jerusalem, to face his impending violent death. Along the way, he met ten lepers, through whom he revealed the nature of the kingdom that he would establish in Gethsemane, on Calvary’s Cross and through his resurrection. In Jesus’ day, anyone with an infectious skin disease was immediately ostracized from the community as a leper. These unfortunates segregated among the sheltering tombs near their main food source, the town rubbish dump, where they foraged for scraps. If downwind, one could smell these marginalized excluded pariahs, these dreaded misfits, before you heard their tinkling bell and their hoarse rasping wheeze from ulcerated vocal chords “Unclean! Have pity on us!”

At once, Jesus rejected centuries of ritual taboo by allowing the untouchables to come close to him. He averred that, in his community, there could be no such thing as an unclean or untouchable person.

There was no tugging at his robe with diseased leprous fingers. Jesus simply challenged the ten lepers to an obedience of faith with “Go, and show your selves to the priest.” By observing this ritual, a priest had power to notarize any cure and to reintegrate the now cleansed ones back into society.

It was wonderful that their shared misery had enabled the nine Jewish sufferers to overcome the barrier of usual separation to admit a Samaritan into their fraternity of the normally friendless.

As soon as the group responded to Jesus’ command and turned towards Jerusalem, all were restored to perfect health, a marvellous experience for them. They could not clean up first, but presented just as they were. Their status as shunned outcast was ended; their isolation was over. They could now be accepted back into society as full and healthy members of the community.

Disgustingly pitiable as they had been, someone had reached out to them, to make them whole. We, too, must take Jesus at his word and come to him, “just as I am, though tossed about, with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, O lamb of God, I come.”

Yet the healed Samaritan would still be despised by Jewry, from the ethnic friction resulting from the imposed intermarriage of Northern Jews with foreign incomers from centuries before. Samaritans were the unlovely, unappealing and unwelcome outsiders of this union, which Jews saw as a hybrid faith. Doubly marginalized as a foreigner, only his polluting illness was gone, and not his polluting ancestry.

Yet, with the eyes of faith, it was the Samaritan alone who had seen in Jesus the presence and the power of God. Jesus was yet again making a point of collecting the strays and calling the outsiders inside. He had done this before. He had been given a nasty reputation for welcoming and eating with sinners. In calling Matthew, he chose a despised tax collector to be a disciple. He allowed a sinful woman outsider to break into a Pharisee meal to anoint his feet. He cured the servant of an occupying Roman centurion. Near the end of his life, he accepted the help of a cross-carrying foreigner, Simon, and, pinned to the cross, he died with outcast criminals on either side.

Our world is still replete with outcasts in dire need of a Saviour. Turkish and Kurds, Israelis and Palestinian Arabs, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, homeless and housed, imprisoned and free, criminal and law-abiding, rich and poor, gays and straights, sinners and saints, wicked and worthy.

There are so many outcasts. How do we respond? Do we see today’s lepers in the isolated, the alienated and the untouchables in our society? Do we respond with compassionate care? Should we be judgemental or permissive? What of child molesters? Should we throw away the prison key? Is that how we feel? Or is ours’ a permissive response? “Deep down, they are nice people, having borne a broken, unhappy childhood. Better, put them on probation and let them go.”

What about the ‘leper’ within us? The weakest, least likeable and most unattractive aspect of myself, which distances me from my sisters and brothers and from my own self-acceptance? For all this, we, too, need to cry out “Jesus, master, have mercy.”

Jesus was a marginal person with the marginalized. Continually, he brought these outsiders in. Can we bring them inside our faith community to offer them ministry and material help? Once, you told your six-year old not to go outside in the cold without her parka, and she came down with a bad cold. That’s what she got for being naughty. Was that all? No way. You sat by her bed, took her temperature, called the doctor, babied her. You wanted her to get well so that you could murder her. She did something bad; no fudging that. But, your love led you to bring her inside and to minister to her with loving caress.

The world defines greatness in terms of power, possessions, position, prestige. Jesus measured greatness in terms of service, not status. He determines your greatness by how many needy ones you serve, and not how many people serve you. We serve God by serving others.

There are many modern lepers around us, isolated, needing compassionate concern. There are outcasts, who merely need to be invited into a community of loving kindness and into a church that opens its heart for those who need it most.

All ten lepers found healing, but only one recognized Jesus’ blessing and rejoiced in it. He saw what had happened as the reign of Jesus and his power, and turned back to thank him with prostration and praise. Jesus raised him up, saying “Go on your way; your faith has made you well.” The other nine left Jesus puzzled. Their response was shabby; the nine healed now treated Jesus as a leper and stayed away from him, never bothering to show their gratitude.

Oscar Wilde, “The Importance of Being Ernest” painfully wrote “As one looks through the pages of history, one is sickened not by the crimes of the wicked, but, by the punishments of the just.” Harsh, judgemental, excluding, unforgiving attitudes is clearly not the way of Jesus. Crucified Jesus offered a last-minute rescue to a despicable fellow, a moral leper next to him. If we dismiss the teachings of the Man of Nazareth, do we become spiritual lepers cut off from the Good News, who need to cry out “Jesus, Master, have pity on us, too”