

THE MAN WHO WANTED TO BE CLEAN

Luke 5v12-15.

This week the three month long Hindu religious festival of Kumbh Mela began at Haridwar in northern India. It is expected to attract some 50 million pilgrims - all going to bathe in the River Ganges. They want to be clean and they believe that this is how they can get clean. On the first morning of the Festival Sushant Raj, a Hindu astrologer, emerged from the river and told everyone: *“Your soul will be cleansed and you will be free from disease if you take a bath during this period.”* In fact the river is highly polluted but that doesn't seem to concern those who come to bathe.

In the west there are also plenty of people who feel soiled and want to be clean - and I'm not just talking about a rugby team after a muddy match.

- Some feel soiled by personal failure. They cannot shake of some big mistake or personal disaster. Their life has spiralled out of control and they have ended up in the mire with nothing but debts or a bad reputation. They long for a clean sheet.
- Some may have committed a serious crime and ended up in prison – or committed a more minor crime, but it still comes up on every CRB check. If only they could start again – the slate wiped clean.
- Some have suffered abuse and feel dirty as a result. They are blameless but that's how their experience has made them feel. Now they find it difficult to trust others and it affects their relationships. If only they could be made clean!
- Some people live with a guilty secret which makes them feel dirty. On the surface they look squeaky clean - but if the secret were to be exposed....!!
- Some are continually tormented by the need to be clean. A common symptom of OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) is the repeated washing of hands.

In the second study in this new series in Luke's Gospel we see a man who wanted to be clean. He came to Jesus and said, **Lord, If you will, you can make me clean.** Why did this man feel so dirty and come to Jesus? To help us understand, consider the plight of this man.

1. His physical plight

v12 While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. The word for leprosy here is a general one covering a variety of chronic skin diseases so we cannot be sure of the exact disease. But whatever it was this man was covered from head to foot. The disease was in its advanced stages and he was in a terrible condition. At its worst, a chronic skin disease like this was crippling. It damaged nerves and wasted muscles. The sufferer's whole body could be inflamed and

covered with infected sores. It would be difficult for him maintain hygiene and so he would also be smelly and soiled. And, of course, the disease left him unable to make a living except by begging. The physical plight of this man was appalling; but there was more for him to endure.

2. His social plight.

Leprosy and other diseases in the same family made you a social outcast. According to Leviticus 13v45f those with conditions like this must *“cry out ‘Unclean, unclean’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.”* This started out as medical isolation (quarantine) but ended up as social ostracism. By the Middle Ages the burial service was read over sufferers; as far as society was concerned such people were as good as dead. The very word “leper” carried the idea of social outcast. In 1948 the International Leprosy Association outlawed the use of the word “leper” in all their work and publications - it had become synonymous with “outcast”.

So this man was expected to stay away from healthy citizens; but he had forgotten this or was simply ignoring it. He was approaching Jesus.

3. His emotional plight.

Leprosy was a disfiguring disease. People would shrink back in horror. They found the sight repulsive. And, of course, they also shrank back because the disease was regarded as contagious. No one would want any physical contact with him. When someone is regarded as physically repulsive and treated like a social outcast emotional damage is inevitable. I recall Clifford Gill, at one time representing the Leprosy Mission, writing: *“In India an old man suffering the ravages of leprosy was found living in isolation and brought to one of our hospitals. While he was being examined by the doctor he broke down and wept – it was years since anyone had touched him.”* Perhaps that why this man said **“if you are willing”**. He had come to have such a low view of himself - it was difficult to believe that anyone cared.

4. His spiritual plight.

Leprosy also had a religious sting. The cry of *“unclean!”* had come to mean spiritually unclean. He was cut off from the synagogue and the temple; cut off from any spiritual comfort. And he was made to feel a threat to other people’s spiritual health. Jewish law had drawn up an extra list of 61 ways you could be spiritually defiled and therefore not fit to worship God; second only to contact with a dead body was contact with lepers. Their rules laid down that you should always stand 4 cubits (6ft) away from them, and if the wind was blowing in your direction you must make it 100 cubits (150 ft). As we have noticed, this man had forgotten all about this.

Leprosy was a living death. What a terrible condition! No wonder he felt unclean. No wonder everyone lived in dread of catching this disease.

And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him. He was desperate; he had long since forgotten about his dignity. **“Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”** Maybe he had heard about the many sick people who had been healed by Jesus outside the home of Simon in Capernaum. His words reveal both faith and impressive insight. Last week we heard Simon Peter say “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord”; he thought he might defile Jesus by close contact. But this sick man had glimpsed a great truth. Contact with Jesus will not defile *him*, it will make the unclean clean!

How would Jesus react? Most would have shrunk away from the leper. **v13. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him saying, “I will, be clean.”** In his version of this incident Mark adds that Jesus was, *“filled with compassion”*.

As we have already seen, many people feel unclean today. If that’s how you feel this morning then Jesus can clean you up. Whether you feel soiled by something you are ashamed of, or by abuse you have suffered - or for some other reason, you can say to Him **“Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”** And you will hear him say **“I will, be clean.”**

In fact, the Bible says that *whether we feel unclean or not* – we all need to be made clean. The whole of humanity has a disease of the soul called sin which makes us unclean and separates us from God. That’s why Jesus came and died on the cross - the sinless for the sinful. Say to Him **“Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.”** And you will hear him say **“I will, be clean.”** When you confess your sin and put your faith in Jesus, you are made clean. One of the first things every brand new Christian is instructed to do - as soon as possible after believing is be baptised in water – not because the water has any magical qualities – but to declare openly that you have been washed on the inside.

Now, back to the man in our Bible passage: **v13. And immediately the leprosy left him.** Just a few words, but think what they represented to the man. Immediately, miraculously, supernaturally made well; totally healed; no longer a dead man walking. His skin was clean. His limbs and muscles were healthy. Imagine his joy and surprise. Imagine the look on the faces of those around.

But remember this was not just about a body being healed. Jesus is always interested in you as a whole person. He was moved with compassion about the man’s physical, social, emotional and spiritual plight. In fact all are interlinked anyway. We must remember that. It is significant as far as our new community project is concerned. Many times it is only after someone has received love and care that they are receptive to the gospel message. In the Gospels healings like this were signs which pointed people beyond the miracle to Jesus.

v14 And he charged him to tell no one. Why? This has often caused puzzlement. Surely this would be nigh on impossible anyway. The clue is in the next part of the text: **“go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them.”** First and foremost this sign was a proof to the authorities. Sometime around 100 BC Pharisaic Judaism distinguished between miracles – between those which anyone empowered by the Spirit of God might do and miracles which could only be done by Messiah Himself. These were known as Messianic miracles. The healing of a leper came into the category of a Messianic miracle. This was because it was such a rarity.

In Leviticus 13 and 14 there were detailed instructions about what to do when a leper was restored, and yet since that Law had been given no Jew had gone through this process. Yes, Moses sister Miriam had been stricken with leprosy for her disloyalty to Moses, but she was immediately restored when he cried to God; she then had to stay outside the camp for seven days. (Numbers 12)). The only other instance of leprosy being healed was when a non-Jew, Naaman the Syrian general, was healed of leprosy after dipping in the River Jordan as instructed by the prophet Elisha. (2 Kings 5) So the rabbis came to believe that there could only be one reason for such detailed instructions. It must mean that when Messiah came he would heal lepers.

If such a miracle was reported it had to be taken very seriously. This could mean that Messiah had come! It set in motion a chain of events over seven days. The miracle was first investigated to see if it was authentic. Having established that the man had indeed been suffering from leprosy and that he had indeed been cured, they also established what and who had brought about the healing. Seven days in which everything pointed to Jesus. This is why Jesus sent the man to the authorities first.

After this the man underwent a series of ritual washings using water from a pure flowing spring, to make him clean. Then on the eighth day there was a trespass offering, a sin offering, a burnt offering and a meal offering. The blood of the first offering was applied to the person and the ceremony ended with anointing with oil. After the eight day procedure the next step was to investigate the healer. That is why we read of the scribes and Pharisees gathering to watch Jesus soon after this (v17).

You might think that this would have been a glorious and exciting process for the religious leaders, one during which their hopes of Messiah's arrival would be rising. But the Gospels tell us the opposite – that they were angry and they set the wheels in motion to prove that this could not be so. Contrast this with the ordinary people.

v15 But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. All around the world, still today, thousands upon thousands of people still come to Jesus like these great crowds and like the man in our story. Jesus still heals bodies today. Jesus still reaches out and touches needy people and makes them clean. And, by His Holy Spirit, he is here with us this morning to do exactly the same.

John Wilthew. January 2010.

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