

Footscray Baptist Church
Sunday 10th October 2004
Luke 17:11-19

One of my all time favourite books is “The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant”. The story is in the style of Lord of the Rings, and like Frodo in Lord of the Rings, Thomas Covenant, has special powers – which is linked to a ring - and an important role to play in a place called The Land, where he fights against evil.

But unlike the Lord of the Rings, this story links back to our world. The book starts in modern times, in Louisiana, where Thomas Covenant is a successful writer with a loving wife and family. But his life is turned upside down, when he develops leprosy. His wife leaves him, he develops gangrene and has to lose two fingers because of an untreated sore, and he finds that he has to totally re-orientate his life so that he does not accidentally cause any more injuries to his now numb arms and legs. Socially, he is now an outcast from his local community. His former friends will have no contact with him and people in the town literally cross the street to avoid being anywhere near him.

In the book, Thomas Covenant the outcast in our world suddenly finds himself in a world where he is seen as a hero, where feeling returns to all parts of his body and where there are people who expect him to act as a hero and leader. Because of his fear of self-injury and the habit of his strict, almost monastic routine in the real world, he cannot accept the reality of The Land, he dismisses it as all being in his imagination. Just in case you want to know what happens, he refuses to act responsibly, or listen to the pleas of the people of The Land, who need him. He is the ultimate anti-hero, who abuses those around him because they are not part of his reality.

What’s interesting is that the author, Stephen Donaldson, is the son of medical missionaries, who lived and worked at a leprosy mission in India until the 1960s. No doubt, growing up in that environment, Stephen Donaldson would have seen at first hand, the dreadful effects of the disease, but also the way people with leprosy were totally outcast in their society. The book provides a good insight into attitudes and fears towards leprosy as well the hurt and distress of those suffering from the disease.

Attitudes towards people with leprosy in Jesus’ time would have been much worse; the product of ignorance, prejudice, fear, and the teachings of the Jewish Law. In the words of the Book of Leviticus, they were “unclean” and as a result, were required to wear torn clothes, leave their hair uncombed, cover the lower part of their faces, and announce to others their suffering, and status as outsiders. Everywhere they went they had to call out “unclean, unclean” and they were required to live away from their own community, in a place that was “outside the camp”.

Perhaps the fear of catching the disease is behind the rule that people with leprosy must live away from the rest of the community, but whatever sensible precaution might have originally been involved, it has been totally overcome by that human tendency to fear those who are different to us. I would venture to say that this is usually the way with religious, or social conventions and rules. What might have started off as a reasonable requirement in order to maintain community health or social behaviour, often turns into some strict law that only reinforces those “who are in” (the ones who pray the right way, dress the right way, believe the right things or are clean) and the ones “who are out” (who may not look quite right, who don’t do the right things, who are not like us, who are unclean).

This group of ten men then, are total outcasts. They are suffering, they have all been cast out from their own families, homes and villages, and the only thing that they have in common, is their disease. As we learn in the passage, although Samaritans and Jews lived in totally separate villages, this group of ten included at least one Samaritan, because the rejection brought on from their disease had thrown them together. Their suffering means that old prejudices are no longer relevant for them, instead they have to face the prejudice and fear of both Jews and Samaritans in the villages around them.

Did you know that only Luke has this story? It doesn't appear in the other three gospels. So I got to thinking, why did Luke include this story, what is it that he wants to say to his readers and listeners? I reckon he wants to say two important things, things that are as relevant to us as individuals and as a church in this century, as they were to Jesus followers in the 1st century. There are two important lessons here, firstly how we as Jesus followers should respond to and be involved with people who are outcasts, and secondly, how we should respond to Jesus himself.

This incident takes place, as v 11 puts in, "as Jesus made his way to Jerusalem". Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem adds the context to everything that happens here. Jesus is on his way to a huge conflict with the religious and political powers in Jerusalem, and it will mean, at one level, the end of Jesus ministry, and his own death. It will also lead to his disciples falling away, they will be unable to cope with what is expected of them, they will be unable to stand with Jesus when all the world turns against him. At one level, all the good times, the teaching, the miracles, will be stripped away. They are coming to an end, and the disciples will come to the realisation that, humanly speaking, they are not up to the task of being disciples of this amazing man.

But even within this greater context, or theme, Jesus, with this expectation of the terrible trial that lies ahead, has stuff that he wants his disciples to learn, to observe and to try and follow. Jesus shows his disciples, in this interaction and in other stories, that the old categories of unclean, of outcasts must be put aside. Jesus shows that in the task of following him, there is no place to consider any person as condemned or outside salvation. Instead he teaches them, "get rid of your old understandings of clean and unclean, saved and unsaved, righteous and sinner" But in the process he also shows that they need to change their understanding of importance, of power, of religion, of legal categories of right and wrong, good and bad". The disciples are forced to think differently about what can and can't be done on the Sabbath, of who is close to God, of how to earn God's favour.

Under the Law, a good person cannot have contact with someone who is unclean, because they risk becoming unclean themselves. But Jesus' response is different. He is not concerned about who he touches, or who talks to, or who he eats with, his sole concern is to share the Kingdom of God, and first and foremost, to offer it with those who have always been considered as not being worthy or fit to share in any community, let alone the community of God's people.

And so we need to ask ourselves, who are the outcasts in our society?

Trip to Kenya – 2000:

- Advertising agency
- Visit to huge slum (1 mill people), armed guards on the bus.
- In a hall, sitting and talking to women who had contracted AIDS. Usually without any partner, totally poor, weak, sick, unable to work, no access to health care.
- I think PLWHA are closest equivalent to PLL of Bible, in terms of how they are treated, especially in the developing world, but also here.
- It was incredibly moving to sit and talk to them. They spoke with conviction, emotion, some fear but also great courage
- Didn't look for pity. Struck by question of "what were you doing to help PLWA in Australia? How are they treated?" In midst of their own condition, they acknowledged need of others. The truth is that I couldn't answer their question very well at all.
- One of the most moving days of my life. Teenagers put on performance with dancing, singing, drumming. Ended up with everyone dancing together, most of us with tears streaming down our faces. There is a video somewhere, and I can tell you, white men can't dance.

Meeting with these women, and seeing the way that an organisation such as World Vision was working with them, was a reminder of the liberating and powerful way that Jesus deals with people. In

his journey towards Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus meets with the people who society wants to forget and he offers them acceptance, healing and wholeness.

And the record of this in Luke's Gospel is there for us as a similar challenge. Who are the outcasts in our society, the ones others dismiss as unclean and **how do we treat them?** It may not be people with leprosy, but it may be PLWA, people without jobs, gays, the homeless, those who are unemployed, and refugees. The clear message of this story is that if we are serious about following Jesus then we need to treat these people, with the same compassion that Jesus offered to the men with leprosy in this story.

I love the fact that this openness to others is expressed in this church's Mission Statement:

*"The Footscray Baptist Church celebrates the God-given diversity of cultures.
We welcome you to join us on the journey of faith whatever your race,
religion, capability, gender or sexuality."*

But the challenge for us, not just as a church but as individuals seeking to follow Jesus, is how do we make sure that we not only have this as our mission statement, but that it is something that we live out, from day to day: that we put it into action the way that Jesus did. As a church, as we consider ways of reaching out into the community, I think we need to be mindful of the dangers of slipping into old ways of seeing the world. The truth is that it is easy to find good reasons, based on religion, politics, tradition, or safety for not reaching out. But in stories like this one, Jesus challenges all his followers, including us, that we need to break out of old ways of seeing things, to refuse to see people as unclean, and instead recognise that in reaching out to people on the margin, we are at the heart of the gospel. As Matthew 25 puts it in the passage on the final judgement, Jesus teaches us that in welcoming strangers, visiting prisoners or feeding the hungry, we are welcoming, visiting or feeding Jesus himself.

I encourage you to think about those people in our community who may be on the edge, to think about how Jesus would respond to them, and to be challenged as to how God might be leading you to be more involved in offering them the hospitality and welcome. Maybe it is in visiting people at Hospital, volunteering with AIDS support groups, supporting the Asylum Seekers Resource Centre. Maybe it's something like being involved in foster care, groups such as Anglicare and others, are constantly looking out for singles or families who are prepared to welcome into their homes a child or young person for any period of time, whether it is in an emergency, or for a weekend every month, or on a more permanent basis.

Secondly, if Luke is wanting to remind his disciples about reaching out to people on the margins, he is also wanting to remind them that there are choices involved in responding to Jesus. This is the message that comes through in the second part of the story. As the ten men were making their way to the priest, they were made clean or healed. One of the ten, a Samaritan, turns around, comes back to Jesus, praising God and throwing himself at Jesus' feet.

I love what Jesus says to him. The way the Good News Bible records it, Jesus spoke up "There were ten men who were healed, where are the other nine? Why is this 'foreigner' the only one who came back to give thanks to God?"

So where were the other nine? How could they not come back to Jesus in the same way as this man, who you might call the "other" Good Samaritan? I suspect that some of them may have been so focused on showing themselves to the priest and proving their healing under the Jewish Law, that the idea of going back to Jesus was not a high priority. If the religion of the Law demanded this step, and required the approval of the priest and the offering up of certain sacrifices, then perhaps for them, this was the most important thing? Perhaps for them, the security of their old religion was the priority, even 'though it was the Law that had increased their sense of isolation and rejection from the rest of

their family and community. The truth is that legalism and religious rules can be very comforting. They offer a security that can blind us to grace and gratitude. For some of these men, it may have been easier to cling to their old religious understanding than be confronted by this powerful and free man who had healed them.

Maybe there were others who thought to themselves, I do want to acknowledge that I have been healed by this man Jesus, and I am very thankful but let me first return to my village, to show my family and friends that I am healed and then I will go to thank the person who healed me? From our perspective as readers, this may be hard to imagine, but is it very different to how we sometimes respond to Jesus and his grace in our lives? It is easy to get distracted by the rest of our lives and lose track of what we have received from Jesus and what we like to think we want to give back to him. Real gratitude and thanks to Jesus can get lost in the detail of life, with jobs, families, and other priorities and commitments.

I know that this happens too often in my life. At times, I can feel desperately in need for God's strength, wisdom or love to cope with a particular situation. It's not as if God waves a magic wand and makes things better, but I usually feel as though God hears this prayer, and is present and helping me. But often, almost straight after, I end up thinking "Well that went well" as if my original prayer for help never meant anything, as if I had done it all myself and that God had not been there at all. There is a human tendency to ask God to be with us and when he is, to refuse to acknowledge it.

I think of my life, of everything that I have; of the blessings of being part of a family who loves me; of the forgiveness and love that God and others have shown to me, and sometimes I think I am miserly in what I give back to God. It's not that I am not grateful to God, it's just that I'm a bit like some of the other nine men, I've got a few important things to do and then I'll make sure that I go back and thank God.

But note who it who immediately went back to Jesus. In Jesus' words, it was the "foreigner": v 18: "Why is this 'foreigner' the only one who came back to give thanks to God?" Now there's a verse for Footscray Baptist. The truth is that it is often the foreigner, the outsider who comes back, he or she is the one who recognises something that is missed by those in the know, those on the inside of power, wealth or religion. It is often the foreigner who has the freedom to express their gratitude to Jesus. And in many ways, here at Footscray Baptist, we are all foreigners to one extent or another. Some of us, quite literally have come from other countries, and left families and loved ones behind. Some are more "foreigners as outsiders", we don't always fit in, because of what we have seen, what we say or believe or do. But the good news is that, as this story points out, sometimes the foreigner, the outsider, is the one who realises that we must turn away from religious rules, or from other commitments to be able to return to Jesus and throw ourselves at his feet.

And what does Jesus say to this one? "Get up and go, your faith has made you well". As the commentators point out, all ten men were healed but only one was made well, or received wholeness or salvation if you want to think of it another way. It was the foreigner.

Before we sing again, I would like you to spend a few minutes thinking about how God has touched your life. Are you, are we, like the nine, who are too caught up in the rest of our lives to return to Jesus to say thanks? Or we willing to be like the foreigner who comes back, who doesn't just settle for healing but seeks God's wholeness as well. What do you need to do to be like the foreigner, the Good Samaritan in this story? Just let God speak to you in these few moments.

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