

Cleansing of the Leper

Mark 1:40-45

12 February 2006

The miracles of our Lord have been even more on my mind than usual these past few days. Many of you know that I indulge in a weekly vice called quizzing, and in fact am part of a team which plays in the Oxford Mail pub quiz league. The Bible and the church are – fortunately – common subjects for questions, and so on Thursday we were asked the name of the son of Abraham and Hagar, and we had no trouble saying Ishmael. Later on, however, we were presented with the category “Christian tradition”. Needless to say, we were confident. And the question came: According to Christian tradition, what was the fish used by Christ to feed the five thousand? Does anyone know? Apparently, it was a haddock, or rather two haddock. You could not make it up. Except that someone obviously did.

This morning’s miracle story in which a leper is cleansed is only six verses of Mark’s gospel, but they are six exceedingly pregnant verses. They come immediately after a day in which Jesus’ whole Galilean ministry seems to be described in summary. He calls disciples to follow him, he casts out unclean spirits, he raises up Simon’s mother in law

who is sick with a fever, he tends and heals those sick and lame who are brought to him at sunset. And then, we are told, he moves on, and the narrator has him travelling throughout Galilee, preaching in synagogues and casting out demons.

Note first the connection between these two types of activity: preaching and teaching on the one hand, and exorcism and healing on the other. Earlier in Mark’s first chapter, when Jesus casts out an unclean spirit, those who have witnessed the event respond with the words “What is this? A new teaching”- a new teaching, not a new power. The physical evidence of the kingdom – the sick restored, the possessed liberated – is the counterpart of the message of God’s redemption: the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand – repent, and believe the gospel.

The leper comes to Jesus, of his own accord, it seems. He pleads with him and kneels before him, but his pleading is also a statement of faith: if you wish to, you can make me clean. Healing, cleansing, then, is the reward of faith, but faith is something which has come about not of its own accord, but in response to the words and deeds of Jesus. Report of him has spread, he has taken it upon himself to bring the kingdom into the towns and the villages of Galilee by words and by deeds of power, the power of God’s redemption. Christian faith is not an achievement of our own, but is always response to the grace of God.

Jesus's response to the leper's faith, however, is extraordinary. The verb used tends to be translated "moved with pity", but "moved with anger" would be more accurate. Etymologically, in fact, it means something along the lines of "gut-wrenching", since it's derived from a Greek word for "innards". But if Jesus is angry, at whom is this anger directed? After Jesus has cleansed the man by his word, there is another linguistic oddity. This time the smoothing over in translation gives us "he sternly charged him", but the relevant word again suggests anger, and is derived from the verb "to snort", used more often of a horse than anything else. Something odd is going on, and that something odd must be connected with our earlier point about not separating exorcism from healing. Mark presents Jesus cleansing the leper almost as an act of exorcism: those whom we would normally call demons, and who have already appeared in the narrative, are by Mark called "unclean spirits". The anger which Jesus demonstrates must be directed at the disease, at the spirit which possesses the man with his condition, if you like. Thus when Jesus sends the man away, it may be that the text originally referred not to the man being sent away (the verb is actually "to cast out") but to the spirit of leprosy being expelled from him.

Why labour this rather obscure detail? Chiefly, I think, because if we are to understand Mark's gospel, the first of the gospels, and its message

concerning Jesus's inauguration of the kingdom of God, we must understand it in part as a battle. There is an urgency and even a violence in the stories which are presented so thick and fast in one breathless scene after another. And if we understand this battle imagery, this theme of conflict, and of choosing sides, we will quickly be led to ask of ourselves the question which is Mark's very intention: which side are you on? The questions concerning the identity of Jesus which Mark asks carefully and progressively throughout his gospel are questions for us also, because our answer to the challenge of the crucified one is an answer which places us in a particular relationship to the cross and to the one who hangs upon it.

The leper is, of course, a perfect representative of an outcast. Excluded by the ritual practices of which we heard from Leviticus, he is moved by the presence of Jesus to vreak every rule and force impurity on another, an impurity Jesus seems happy to embrace. He stands on the outside of the Christian community, on the threshold of faith as we sometimes say, and he is drawn in by the saving act of Christ. He is, in other words, a representative of each of us, of the church itself, a stranger once but now made welcome into the kingdom of the crucified and risen messiah. But if we leave it there we miss something vital. For the best evidence that the leper has become one of us, that he, like us, has gone from outside to inside, from exclusion to salvation is simply this: he is welcomed by

Christ, and told what to do - and he gets it completely wrong. Jesus commands him to tell no-one, but simply to fulfil the correct ritual procedure. But the leper does not realise that works of power are one thing, but they will lead to the cross of weakness and shame. Rather than keep quiet, he spreads the word all over town, shouting the news so loudly that Jesus is forced to protect himself by staying outside the town, by becoming himself the outcast, by taking on the role which the one who has been restored has now left vacant.

In this tiny little story, the life of the church is beautifully and ironically contained. That leper is you and he is me, because he is transformed by the love of God, brought from darkness into light, only immediately to misunderstand, to get it wrong, to drive out not demons but God himself by his disobedience and his certainty that he knows better than the commands of Jesus Christ. As Mark's gospel makes clear, such well meaning stupidity is the frequent characteristic of all of Jesus's disciples. Fortunately for us all, he did, and does not, give up on them.