

Giving up indifference

a sermon preached on the

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: 2 Kings 5: 1-14; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1: 40-45

Naaman, the leprous army commander encounters the King of Israel and with Elisha the prophet provoking a contest of dignity between the three. First, on the part of the King of Israel who is not best pleased at being tasked with curing a person who is at the same time, a foreigner, his junior and afflicted with a disease of ritual impurity.

Second, despite his affliction, Naaman's ego was also offended by his rather cool treatment by the King of Israel and relegation to the ministrations of the less senior Elisha. However, with few other options Naaman relented and did as Elisha directed - from a distance - and his skin was 'restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.' If only I could swim in that river!

Lepers, according to the Torah, are to stay outside the village, tear their clothes and wear their hair dishevelled not to consort with kings and prophets. Leprosy here is possibly an inapt translation of a Hebrew word that covers a wide range of skin afflictions, several of which I have suffered from myself, and you too probably - but not Leprosy as we now know it - Hansen's disease. These common skin ailments were understood to be a response to sinfulness of many types.

Leprosy is, of course, a biblical cypher for marginalisation - those banished from society, unable to work, unable to attend worship and, if the priestly ministrations that the Torah prescribes for their cure were not effective, left to die in sin.

The Torah's ritual requirements for lepers, at the hands of the priest, are fairly stringent and probably a waste of time given that nothing the priest does looks anything like treatment we would recognise today, even herbal remedies. They involved a certain amount of washing, the ritual slaughter of birds and lambs, the sprinkling of blood and oil, shaving of hair and more washing of clothes and body. These rituals, performed over ten days, are an extraordinarily long, complex and expensive process.

Jesus' healing of the leper is an altogether different encounter, one clothed in humility. Unlike Naaman the leper kneels before Jesus. Jesus, a King, immediately responds, not like the king of Israel. Also, by healing the leper, Jesus breaks the law. We know this because elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus' healing causes the Pharisees and Scribes to accuse him of blasphemy.

Jesus' act is not only one of humility but also of compassion and, by opposing the old order, one of community-building. He directly confronts the status quo to bring the leper living on the margins, the one excluded from society, back into community by erasing his ritual impurity. Moreover, his healing is immediate and cost free. The leper is not expected to go through the convoluted purification rituals, only to make a thank-offering.

We don't see leprosy or skin diseases generally as much of a problem these days. They certainly don't lead to marginalisation. But we do have our modern marginalised. We are aware of the isolation in this country of asylum seekers and the indigenous, but a report published in January by Oxfam, called 'The Growing Gulf Between Work and Wealth,' tells us more.

It says the top 1% of Australians by wealth own 22.9% of the national wealth. That is about the same as the bottom 70%. The bottom 10% own only 0.2% of the nation's wealth.

This inequality is growing by about 1% per year—i.e. each year the top 1% gain 1% of the national wealth while the bottom 70% lose 1%. And it has been growing for the past two decades, making Australia one of the least equal countries among the 35 OECD nations. Further, the report says, in the last 10 years household income has fallen for all but the top 20% while in the same decade the number of billionaires doubled.

The inequality is more serious if you compare our wealth here and that of nations who are the makers of our consumer goods—clothing and footwear is a good example. Oxfam reports the highest paid CEOs in the Australian clothing retail sector can earn, on average, around \$6 million annually. At the same time, women working in Bangladesh to make the clothes sold by these brands, earn a wage of less than AUD\$1,000 per annum.

The contemporary margins of our society are a place of inequality of wealth and opportunity and hope.

You might want to accuse me of the politics of envy, but the problem with inequality is, to quote the Oxfam report that: 'highly unequal societies face greater social problems. Countries that are more unequal show worse social outcomes including in health, life expectancy, mental illness, imprisonment rates, obesity, and social mobility.'

The practice of marginalisation is to keep people like the poor, the homeless, impoverished outsource workers, asylum seekers and the indigenous, out of sight and so out of mind. Jesus, although King, did not, as the King of Israel did, hold himself apart from the marginalised, he had no material wealth, no fine clothes or palace, no crown except a crown of thorns at the end. But he freely gave of his gifts - his capacity to forgive and to heal.

The allegory is clear—the church of Jesus Christ is called to name this truth. It is called to be prophetic. It is called to tell truth to power. Why then is it Oxfam, a welfare organisation free of religious identity, that is the prophet here? How hard do we in the church work for the marginalised?

At Candlemass, last Sunday we observed a celebration as steeped in the ritual of Torah as the curing of leprosy. Jesus' parents followed the levitical prescription for his presentation in the Temple, forty days after his birth, in the weakness and utter helplessness of a baby. Yet the prophecy made by Simeon, you will recall, was for a future in which Jesus would need unprecedented strength, a strength that is displayed in Jesus' confrontation of the authorities in his healing ministry. Jesus legacy to the church is to be strong in the face of injustice as he was strong.

In 2011, around the world, the Occupy movement, another non-religious organisation, rose in support of the poorest 1% of the world. You might remember their confrontation with police in City Square here in Melbourne. The unconventional appearance and the affront to decency by the protesters gave the then Lord Mayor a political platform to name it a disgrace and he authorised violence to 'clean it up.'

As this 'clean up' was going on Synod was in session in the Cathedral less than 100 metres away. The Archbishop prayed for peace as tensions escalated. But we could have walked outside and stood with the 1%. We could have risked social opprobrium, we might have even risked arrest. But we did not. Who in this vignette was the most Christ-like? Oxfam, Occupy, the Church?

As we approach Lent this week I recall Pope Francis, in 2015, making it his Lenten discipline to give up indifference. In the light of truth like that reported by Oxfam, is the church prepared to give up its indifference and be called into principled prophetic action? Is it prepared to be partial, to confront convention? Is it prepared to be more like a movement than an institution? Is it prepared to exercise Christ-like disobedience on behalf of the marginalised? Because that seems to me to be what the Gospel calls us to do.