

Blessed are those who receive the gift of God

Our gospel reading from the Gospel of Mark describes the encounter of Jesus with a leper. It is, to my mind, a relatively complex account. I'm tempted to regard the leper in a negative light. However, I think that there is much that is positive in that encounter between Jesus and the leper—and positive also from the side of the leper himself.

Lepers, as we can learn, were people suffering from a variety of skin conditions, apparently; and it's hard to specify precisely just what condition a particular individual was suffering from. If you read the book of Leviticus, there is great detail in the symptoms associated with leprosy, which seems to be quite a broad term covering quite a variety of conditions.

But these people, presumably because of fear of contagion, were to live outside of towns, and they were also to cry out, whenever somebody approached them, "Unclean! unclean!" Furthermore, their condition was dependent on a verdict given by the priest in Jerusalem, a priest who would take a look at the symptoms, and say whether or not this person was "clean" or "unclean".

For physical reasons, it was not a desirable condition, obviously. But there are many undesirable qualities, socially, as well, as far as interaction with other people, because, essentially, people were in "isolation". You couldn't touch a leper; you stayed away from a leper; the leper lived in a secluded area, an area away from people.

Given that description of leprosy, we can take a look at our passage from Mark's gospel, where Jesus encounters this leper. The leper does not cry out to him, as far as we know, "Unclean! unclean!" but says to him instead, "If you will, you can make me clean." Another special quality about what happens is that Jesus has mercy on this individual and actually takes that person's hand in his own, and says, "I will; be made clean." And the man was cleansed of his leprosy.

Now, all of that would be a source of great relief to this individual. But he began to express his relief in a variety of ways. He heard Jesus' command, which was that he say nothing to anyone, but go and show himself to the priest, as a testimony to them. But the man, instead of doing that was so, apparently, taken up with what had happened to him, that he was going around, if not saying to everyone, "Clean! clean" now, he was at least telling them what had taken place. And he caused, apparently, quite a stir, in the communities nearby where he lived, such that people came out to see Jesus, rather than Jesus being able to go into those communities.

What we see here is a person being made free, liberated from a condition. And he is apparently reacting to that liberation by the things he does do—proclaiming to everyone what has taken place. The consequences aren't entirely positive, because Jesus has to remain in a secluded place himself, where people come to him.

Freedom is something that God does for us. And God is the one who calls people into freedom right from the story of Exodus in the book of Exodus, where Moses brings the people out of Egypt, out of slavery, following the leadership of the LORD, and brings them into the promised land.

But this liberation shows itself in a number of ways. And the apostle Paul wants to proclaim that, in Christ, there is male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor Greek; they are all one in

Christ Jesus. So, no matter what our condition, faith in Christ brings us into a new relationship with God, and, therefore, secondarily, with other people.

Now, Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, states that, if you happen to be married, well, remain in wedlock, if you are a follower of Christ. If you are a slave, remain as a slave. But, he adds the proviso that, if you have an opportunity for freedom [from being a slave], well, take it, because the Lord doesn't want any person enslaved.

The gospel has this powerful freeing aspect to it, which applied to the leper, which applies to us all, as we are called into faith in Christ, and find new life and new relationship with one another. And, sometimes, that freedom means a conflict, perhaps, with previous ways in which our lives have been structured.

It's interesting that this leper is not the only emboldened sort of person who comes to Jesus, and disturbs his peace, so to speak. There is blind Bartimaeus. When Jesus and his followers are coming into Jerusalem, he is shouting, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And the crowd wants him to be quiet, to settle down. Or the people bringing children to Jesus. The disciples do not want that, because that would disturb the Master. But Jesus says to them, "Let the little children come to me..." And there are a number of other examples. This man, the leper, apparently sensed in Jesus the opportunity, the prospect, of freedom, and laid hold on it. And the result was just what he hoped. He was freed of his condition.

Well, what do we make, then, of Jesus' command? Jesus had commanded that he tell nothing to anyone about what had taken place, that he go to present himself to the priest, as a witness to them. What do we make of that commandment? Was Jesus serious about that? Should this man have obeyed what Jesus asked of him? Or was it more important, simply, to exult in the freedom that he now had from this leprosy condition—and live in company with others, touch someone, have someone touch him, and rejoin human society? Wasn't that sufficient?

Well, we are, as far as we know, to take that command seriously, or the command that was given to him, seriously. Jesus, evidently, wanted the man to go and present himself to the priest, as a witness to them.

The apostle Paul describes his own life as one that is freed from the law, the constraints of the law, but—on the other hand—we are called into obedience to Christ. So the man was in the wrong, in the sense that he certainly was called into freedom, and it was a great thing; but he could have, and should have, apparently, used his freedom to obey the command of Jesus to him to present himself, to present his condition, to the priest.

Why? Well, perhaps because this would fulfil the requirement of the [Old Testament] law, and therefore be in keeping with the customs of the day. And, indeed, in our own freedom in the gospel, we don't just go out and do whatever; we don't just exult in our own freedom. We are called into obedience in such a way that, for example, the Church is built up.

The apostle Paul, in that same letter to the Corinthians, talks about a place of worship, which could become bedlam, unless certain rules were observed—like listening to other people, for example—because, according to Paul, God is not a God of disorder, but a God of order. "Let everything be done decently and in order," as 1 Corinthians 14 tells us.

So, as well as calling us into the freedom of the children of God—sometimes in a way that conflicts with taboos and practices of the day, Jesus also calls into obedience to his command. And this is really what this leper should have done, as well as being free of his leprosy.

Now, there is one other thing that I would like to draw your attention to in the passage. He has this command, and it's particular people that are in mind, that Jesus has in mind for him to present himself to—namely, the priest, or priests. These were those people, on whose life he was dependent. They were the ones who examined his body to determine whether the leprosy had spread, or whether it was diminishing somehow, whether it had left him. These were the people who, presumably, in the past had said, "Unclean! unclean! Out of here, and back to your place!" So these were difficult people for this man to approach. In his freedom, he would go to no matter whom—people that he could easily relate to. But Jesus called on him to go to these difficult people—"Go to the priests, and show them what has been done, as a witness to them."

And Christ, who has called us into the freedom of the children of God, calls us into obedience to his command, and to, in fact, be a witness to some people whom we have difficulty approaching. We are to go out of our way to approach these people that Christ directs us to, in order, truly, to be a witness of the life that he has created in us.

Luther wrote a tract, entitled, "The Freedom of the Christian Man"; in that, he speaks of Christians being free from all, and yet servant of all. In a way, that, of course, is true. We are called into the freedom of the children of God. But we are also called into obedience to Christ's command, and obedience, which sometimes takes us to those people whom we would rather not have anything to do with. Christ calls us to be a witness to them, by our lives, by the characteristics we display, the way we relate to such people—in order [for them] to truly see that we are healed, we are made clean, we are freed from those things which have enslaved us—in such a way that we can be a servant, on God's behalf, on Christ's behalf, of our neighbour.