

“JESUS INCLUDES”

Mark 1:40-45 [MW18-05]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 11 February 2018

I was looking for a funny story about being included or excluded and found this: Helvetica and Times New Roman walk into a bar. “Get out of here!” shouts the barman. “We don't serve your type.”

The ancient Hebrews did not have our medical knowledge, or know about bacteria

- but they saw people getting sick from eating pigs
so they instituted kosher laws forbidding the eating of pork
- there were a huge number of diseases that were also the object of such laws: tuberculosis, small pox and so on
- and there were also people with a range of skin diseases that were under the general heading of “leprosy”:
acne, ringworm, scabies, psoriasis
- then, of course, there was real leprosy – Hansen's disease
ironically this was not as contagious as some of the others
but it was an especially horrific disease
- with its running sores, decaying, disfiguring flesh and fearful odour
people with partial limbs and half faces
- leprosy was uniquely despised because it was so ugly
and lepers were repulsive, unloveable, even perceived as evil
- such sicknesses came to be regarded as 'divine punishment'
so a matter for the priest, rather than a physician

A person with leprosy had no hope of receiving love

- no hope of being accepted as a person
no hope of enjoying ordinary human companionship
- the Hebrews lived in absolute terror of leprosy
and made all sorts of laws to segregate those with the disease
- Leviticus 13:45-46 states very clearly:
*If you ever have leprosy, you must tear your clothes, leave your hair uncombed, cover the lower part of your face, and go around shouting, “I'm unclean! I'm unclean!”
As long as you have the disease, you are unclean and must live alone outside the camp.*
- a leper was the ultimate outsider
and yet, and yet the leper in the gospel reading came and knelt before Jesus saying:
if you wish, you can make me clean

Why did this man make such a tabooed, forbidden move?

- because he had heard of Jesus' power to heal
more important, he had heard that Jesus cares about those no one else cares about
he had heard that Jesus includes
- this man had somehow learnt that Jesus includes the excluded
and who was more excluded than him
- and so he came
much to the chagrin of the onlookers, he came right up to Jesus

To the absolute horror of that watching crowd

- Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the man
Jesus actually touched this non-person who was looked upon with fright
if not downright hatred by the medical and religious authorities

- this leper was suspected of having committed some terrible sin that is the reason he is so afflicted
- and he had well and truly overstepped the mark even speaking to Jesus let alone coming so close to him ... and them

But Jesus was there for this man as he was for so many outcasts

- Jesus reached out and touched this man with a dreaded disease in place of isolation, he gave companionship
- in place of rejection, he gave acceptance
- in place of disgust, he gave compassion
- perhaps the real power of this gospel is not that a sick man was made healthy but that a person universally seen as repulsive, unloveable, even evil is in fact loved
- rather than being shut out, this previously excluded one is shown to be the object of God's mercy and compassion

Perhaps we may not be able to instantly cure a horrible disease as Jesus does here

- but we can do just what Jesus did and reach out
- in place of isolation, we can give companionship
- in place of rejection, we can give acceptance
- in place of disgust, we can give compassion
- in short, we can touch ... and include

That's what Jesus does – Jesus includes

- Jesus saw this man with a dreaded skin disease, with leprosy, as a person Jesus welcomed, accepted, included the whole person
- or as we might say: “warts and all”
- Jesus loved that man in the gospel reading “warts and all”
- horrible, disgusting, disfiguring leprosy and all
- everything is included

I invite you to reflect on that for just a moment

[space]

Sometimes someone we know might have an annoying behaviour or habit

- that if they would just stop doing they would be so much easier to like
- or maybe there is something in their background and if that wasn't there ...
- perhaps we might have even experienced people thinking the same about us that if we did or didn't do that, had this, looked like the other then, then we too would be welcome ...

But you know what, Jesus includes

- Jesus includes ...

One commentator I came across wrote this, which made me think:

The medical profession has done a lot for body leprosy, ringworm, acne and so on. It has humbly done less for soul leprosy, the leprosy of rejection and exclusion. If for example you have ever felt anonymous, abandoned, a non-person, you have had a feeble hint of what it was like to be a leper in days of yore.

I'm guessing none of here is suffering or has suffered from leprosy?

- but I'm not taking it for granted
- however I suspect that most of us have experienced at one time or other being 'on the outer' ... things like
 - as a child, being second or even third fiddle to a preferred sibling not being picked, being laughed at, the last one chosen
 - missing out on a position or promotion after many loyal years and worse, it goes to some young hotshot who's only been there five minutes
 - to be downsized after thirty grinding years and trying to find a new job near retirement
 - betrayal by a partner, spouse or friend
 - that disappointing thing you swore you would never do
 - feelings of guilt, unworthiness, spiritual flatness that lie hidden underneath a bright exterior

To all this Jesus says:

Come to me all of you who labour and are burdened by hurt and isolation and carry the wound of being cut off and I will refresh you.

Jesus includes ...

Are you labouring? Burdened by hurt and isolation?

Carrying the wounds of being cut off?

Come to me, says Jesus, and I will refresh you.

And then in these five significant verses in Mark's Gospel

- there is something I never noticed, something I overlooked something I did not see the significance of
- but it was pointed out by that same commentator I mentioned before William J. Bausch

I must point out, lest you miss the supreme irony in the story. Remember, as the gospel story opened, Jesus was in community and could move about freely and the leper was cut off, excluded. By the time the story ends, the situation is reversed; the leper went off into the company of people, while it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. Jesus had taken the leper's place. Having touched the leper, *he* was now under the sentence of exclusion. The cleansed leper can now enter the town while the one who cured him cannot. Truly he has taken upon himself our infirmities. He feels what we feel.

Jesus feels what we feel because Jesus includes

This is the last Sunday in the season of "Epiphany"

- the season of light
 - the season of celebrating Jesus as the Saviour of the *whole* world and *all* people
 - the season of reminding ourselves the church is to be a 'light for the nations'
- which ties in with the the themes of welcome, healing, inclusion we have been considering
- so to conclude, three stories ...
 - which remind us that Jesus includes us, so we may include others ...

A little girl was sent on an errand by her mother, but took far too long getting back. When she finally returned, the mother demanded an explanation. The little girl explained that on her way she met a friend who was crying because she had broken her doll. "Oh," said the mother, "then you stopped to help her fix her doll?" "Oh no," replied the little girl. "I stopped to help her cry."

A young woman was waiting for a bus in a slum area when a rookie policeman approached her. "Would you like me to wait with you?" he asked. She replied, "Thank you. But that's not necessary. I'm not afraid." "Well then," said the rookie policeman, grinning, "would you mind waiting with me?"

A man was accompanying an infant Vietnamese orphan to the United States, so she could be adopted after the war. On the long flight to the U. S. the baby's eyes overflowed with tears but she made absolutely no sound. The concerned man found a stewardess and asked her what the problem was. The stewardess had seen war orphans before and assured the man this was normal. She explained: "The reason these babies make no noise when they cry is because they learned a long time ago that nobody will come."

The message is that Jesus will come

- because Jesus includes
Jesus includes ... you