



## **The Touch of God in the Midst of our Anguish**

### **Mark 1:40-45**

As the nation sought to come to terms with the extent of the tragedy of the Victorian fires in early February 2009, in the liturgy we read the story of the encounter between Jesus and a man covered in leprosy. What might this extraordinary story have to offer us in the midst of our own experience of loss and confusion?

Let us address this question first by understanding the significance of the encounter of which the story tells in the context of the gospel itself.

For the ancient Palestinian community leprosy was the supreme symbol of the dangerous. It was a symbol of alienation. Lepers were outside the community and the Law: they were beyond the pale of humanity and of God's dealings. Once detected, the leper wandered in the caves in the wilderness until they died. Yet, in the very first chapter of Mark's Gospel we hear of Jesus' encounter with a leper. By accident or design we do not know. We can, however, wonder at Jesus' reaction when he meets the leper. All his social conditioning would have urged him to 'run.' Beyond his own revulsion and fear, though, he stays, and he enters into an exchange with this person.

The exchange, however, has some unexpected twists in it. The original Greek illustrates that Jesus did not have pity on the leper at all. Rather, he got angry with the leper – or more accurately, it seems, with the leprosy itself. Nor, in the original Greek, did Jesus give simply 'a stern warning to the leper.' Rather, he "terrified" him. Then, instead of 'sending him on his way,' Jesus "casts him out" after healing him. All in all, the English translation of the Greek is very tame.

What is the strength of the original Greek of the text depicting this encounter between Jesus and a leper seeking to communicate? The terms and words in the original Greek are presenting a Jesus who is not somehow above what he encounters, but rather a Jesus who is passionately involved, someone who feels within himself the threat, who stands his ground and enters into a kind of battle with what he experiences. The language of the text speaks of Jesus' passionate involvement with the leper. He does not remain unaffected by the encounter.

Not only does the language of the story indicate this, however. Even more powerfully, the account of Jesus' gesture towards the leper signals the depth of such involvement. He touches the leper. To touch a leper in ancient Jewish law, to come into contact with a leper, was to become one, and subsequently to be treated as one. By touching the leper, by immersing himself so much into the battle, Jesus becomes a leper. It shocks us because it disrupts any sanitized idea we have of God. In Jesus, God identifies so closely with our struggle, that he takes that struggle upon

himself. God becomes a leper so that the leprosy of our own isolation, our own brokenness, our own confusion and questioning, is taken away. We are no longer alone. He is one with us, one of us.

We have a God who is prepared to be covered in sores, who is prepared to be cast out and thought of as rubbish, who is prepared to wander in the wilderness and die there – and who, of course, eventually does. We believe in a dangerous God.

In the wake of the recent horrific fire in Victoria, and in the midst of the suffering of so many people who have lost so much, it is important for us to remember this in a particular way. There is a part of us that wants to ask, “How could God let this happen?” “How can a good God allow for such unwarranted suffering?”

Yet, the story of Jesus overturns this question. It forces us to accept that bad things do happen to good people. This is the nature of life in all of its randomness and unpredictability.

If this be, the question in the midst of such tragedy then becomes, “What is our response to be in the face of such unpredictability and suffering?” Jesus has revealed a God who does not somehow preserve his identity above the suffering caused by life’s randomness, but a God who has become passionately involved with us in all that affronts us. God touches our anxious questioning about how such a tragedy could occur; God touches the unimaginable grief of those who lost loved ones; God touches the depth of uncertainty about how the future might be entered in the face of such losses. In so touching these experiences, God takes these experiences into his own self. They become his experiences, just as Jesus becomes a leper by touching the leper. God touches our anxiety and our anguish and takes them into himself. They are not foreign to God.

Yet, in God, our anxiety and our anguish meet infinite possibility. Our anxiety and anguish, shocking as they may be, are, therefore, no longer the whole story. They are no longer the caves in which we are entombed so that we are left simply to die in the wilderness. In God, we are given more than them.

Each of us cries out, “If you want to you can cure me!” We want to be cured from what makes us fearful, from what paralyses us, from what numbs us, from what eats away at us. Now, we know that none of this is foreign to God. He knows it because, in Jesus, he has touched it all. And in touching it, he has reminded us that no matter how painful our experience, there is more to us than our fear, our paralysis, our numbness, our confusion, our uncertainty, our anxiety, our anguish.

The assurance of ‘the more’ given to us in his embrace of us stirs deep within us, the power of the true healing Jesus brings into our life.

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