

Sunday 15th November 2020 – West Kirk and Polbeth Harwood

Jesus heals ten men with a skin disease (Luke 17:11-19)

'In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit'



According to the dictionary the word thankfulness is a feeling or expression of gratitude. An acknowledgement that someone has been kind and helpful. It is a way of expressing your appreciation.

As we draw near to the end of the calendar year and two weeks away from moving onto a new lectionary year and all that means for the church, Nanda and I would like to share our thankfulness and appreciation to all of you who have supported the church through what has been a challenging year.

For your encouragement, your prayers and support, your pastoral support of others, for taking the 'couch' to others, for ensuring the Link was prepared and distributed, for checking on neighbours and running errands for the most vulnerable, for help with the online services, for maintaining the buildings and so much more. Nanda and I are truly thankful to you.

Thank you for your help and support, thank you for all the positive things that have happened during this difficult period. And for your faith in journeying through this testing period.

It seems such an inadequate word, but, perhaps like the man in our gospel reading today, the man who returned to Jesus after being healed of leprosy, there is no other word, although it does quite sum up all the feelings and emotions.

In the story, Jesus and his disciples came across a leper colony on their way to Jerusalem. There was no known cure for leprosy and the regulations meant they were isolated from everyone else – **they had to self-isolate**, sounds familiar doesn't it, **social distancing biblical style**.

In Bible times, people suffering from the skin disease of leprosy were treated as outcasts. Leprosy sufferers had to leave their homes and families and live together with other sufferers on the outskirts of the town. They would have to scavenge for food. They were forbidden to have any contact with people who did not have the disease, they could not go to the market place and were forbidden to take part in worship.

If anyone had a skin disease from which they were cured (which was unlikely in the case of leprosy), Jewish Law stated they could not re-enter society unless they first went to the priest to be checked before receiving a certificate to say they were now 'clean'.

Palestine was divided into three regions - **Galilee, Judea** and **Samaria**. The Jews hated the inhabitants of Samaria who were known as Samaritans. In the past, their ancestors had married foreign invaders from a non-Jewish background. Since then, the Samaritans were treated in an inferior way as they were not 'pure' Jews.

In the story had the group heard about the preacher and healer Jesus? *Did they know he was going to pass or be near their way that day?* We don't know but as He came to the village the men cried out, 'have pity on us'. *Did you notice that it is only when the story unfolds we learn the racial mix of the group, Jew and Samaritan?*

Leprosy had torn down the barriers that would have otherwise divided these men. In extreme adversity, Jew and Samaritan, were simply men in need and Jesus never walked passed on the other side when someone was in need.

Notice too, there is no small talk, *'how are you coping', 'how are you feeling'?* The ten men with leprosy stood at a distance as they understood the law forbidding them to have contact with people who did not have the disease.

Neither does Jesus ask them to prove themselves worthy of deserving of help. Jesus simply shouts back at them to go to the priests and show themselves. They are healed on the way there, but tests their faith by asking them to go and see the priests. ***However, it is the one who returns who shows the most faith and thankfulness towards Jesus.***

We do not know how many of the men were Samaritans, but it is significant that the only one to return was a Samaritan. Jesus commented "Why is this foreigner the only one who came back to give thanks to God?"

Now Jesus knew the men would know that according to ancient law that it was a priest who would have to certify them clean and well again. If they were certified as being well, they could resume normal life with their families and communities. Life would get back to normal!

So the only purpose in going to see a priest, and the only place they would find one was in Jerusalem, in the Temple. And the dramatic tension of the story mounts because not only was Jesus going to Jerusalem, but also the men are too - to be declared clean.

Now if the story had ended at this point it would be another remarkable healing power and compassionate story of Jesus. But the story doesn't end there. It takes an unexpected twist, because one of the men, the Samaritan, comes back to say thank you.

Do you suppose the other nine were any less grateful? It is not hard to imagine that when the priest declared them clean, that they rushed back to their families.

They were desperate to return home to their families and that's just the point, for the Samaritan was also desperate to see his family but he waited and wanted to seek out the man who healed him.

This is the heart of the story. As much as saying thank you the man also wants to acknowledge that in Christ he has found the true source, the true source of healing, of wholeness.

'Rise and go', Jesus tells him and the language is the language of resurrection – for the man was effectively dead and now he is alive again and soon in Jerusalem the one who healed him would die, but the story doesn't end there either, does it?

This is also prisoners' week and this story reminds me of the exclusions that prisoners and their families feel - and I wonder - for all the support and help prisoners and their families receive, how many of them are thankful to come back and say thank you to those who supported them?

Some will thank the service and support services they receive. Some will receive help willingly and turn their lives around and be accepted back into Society and we in turn thank the services and skilled workers supporting prisoners and families to help them turn their lives around from brokenness to wholeness.

The story of Jesus and the lepers makes clear what is described here is the continuing journey of faith and life, from brokenness to wholeness, from sickness to health, from exclusion to inclusion, from abandonment to belonging, from rumours that reach scarred ears to the gracious words we long to hear, 'arise and go on your way, your faith has made you whole'.

Thank you Jesus.

Amen.