

Year B Quinquagesima HTK 2021 Gospel Mk 1.40-45

Late last year Jennifer and I flew WA for what was a rather extraordinary experience. The West Australian government had closed the borders to the extent that any exempt travellers had to go into quarantine for 14 days. Before leaving you also had to get permission to travel, this in the form of a G2G pass which was loaded onto your mobile phone. When we arrived at Perth Airport our expectation was that we would be soon in a hire car and driving down the Albany Highway to Jennifer's home nearly 500 Kms away in Denmark. However, for the first 70 minutes on the tarmac we sat in our seats because there was no room for us in the inn!

Two planes had arrived at about the same time as us and they could only process so many people at once. After the long wait we were directed to this wonderful hangar where we were greeted by Army, Navy, Police, health officials and the like who processed us fairly promptly. The first thing they did was to say take of those masks that you got are no good, they come from the East Coast, we have our own West Coast masks, please take yours off.

Then began the saga of the journey. You will go direct to your accommodation, you will not stop on the way at any café, restaurant or the like. Please do not use any public toilets or get out of your car other than in the bush!

Once we arrived at Denmark it became quite clear that being in quarantine is a very sobering experience. Everything we needed had to be ordered and delivered with no person-to-person contact. Even the neighbours kept their distance, some almost scurrying away if hailed through the fence. A kind neighbour agreed to deliver the daily newspaper, but I was staggered to see her each day drop the paper on the ground and then sanitise her hands.

All this in town that had never had any COVID infections. Indeed, at that stage WA had had no community transmission for nearly 6 months. Even when our quarantine was completed, we were still treated with suspicion as though we might be infected,

I said before it was a very sobering experience and it was, but it reminded me of another equally sobering one, except that was 50 years before and at the other end of Australia, in Darwin in 1970. I was invited by some fellow members of the Apex club to join them on a trip to deliver some Christmas toys to some needy kids. They suggested it was reasonably long trip as it was to take us to the other side of the Darwin Harbour to place called East Arm. I was amazed when we arrived to find that we were at a Leprosarium, a facility I had never heard of let alone suspected was operating in Darwin.

The East Arm Leprosarium opened in 1955 and replaced the earlier Channel Island Leprosarium. Situated some kilometres south east of Darwin, it was run by the Northern Territory Administration and was staffed by nursing Sisters from a Catholic order, the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. Patients isolated at the Leprosarium included children as young as four years of age. I hasten to add that improvements in treatment and changing attitudes towards the disease led to the closing of East Arm Leprosarium in 1982, after which patients were treated in regular hospitals.

We distributed the toys to the kids, and I remained in state of semi shock until we got back to Darwin. I had never seen people with what is now better known as Hansen's disease, but what shocked me the most was the fact that it remained a hidden secret in this northern capital of over 75 000 people. Not only that, but that I discovered it because I was a member of Apex, not as an Anglican Priest.

It was as though I had become a time traveller and was standing on the same road as Jesus and the man who called out to him seeking a cure from his disease in today's gospel. Here I was in 1970 amid a community that continued to suffer from the isolation and rejection that is equally evident in today's Gospel.

So, what are we to make of today's gospel reading? Is it just an interesting story but no longer relevant to us today? Though the fact that we are all in the middle of a five-day lockdown in Victoria because of COVID 19, certainly adds an unusual dimension.

The whole of Mark's gospel and his story of Jesus has been described as a narrative for and about the common people. It reflects the daily realities of disease, poverty and disenfranchisement that characterised the social existence of 1st century Palestine's other 95%.

Disease and physical disability were an inseparable part of the cycle of poverty (a phenomenon still true today despite the advent of modern medicine) For the day labourer, illness meant unemployment and instant impoverishment.

Leprosy of course was among the most common of all those illnesses. The essence of the regulations concerning leprosy as set down in Leviticus was one, the disease is communicable and two, the priest must preside over ritual cleansing. Indeed, it went so far that the person suffering from leprosy was obliged to cry out at a distance "Unclean, unclean" so that no one would approach them (Lev 13.45)

Both principles are challenged in this episode not only that, but Mark makes the point of emphasising that Jesus *touched* the leper. But, whereas according to the symbolic order Jesus should have contracted the disease, instead Mark reports that the leper becomes clean. For this symbolic action, the power of the symbolic order has been overturned.

The unnamed man himself appears aware that this approach to Jesus, a non-priest, was itself in violation of the symbolic system, which is why he gives Jesus an opportunity to refuse. It's almost as if he says you could declare me clean if only you would dare.

Too often, I suggest we get drawn into believing that faithful discipleship means cultivating the correct emotion in our hearts: peaceful contemplation in worship, when truly our minds are roiling with worry; sympathy for a person in need, when truly we are preoccupied with our own concerns; excitement for a trip (even in a lockdown) or a life change, when truly we are apprehensive. When Jesus feels anger and then acts with compassion, as he did on this occasion, he reminds us that discipleship can mean loving God and our neighbour with our actions *even* when we are angry or anxious or

distracted. Discipleship can mean responding faithfully to God's surprises and life's curveballs, even when it is hard. And in that endeavour, we are never alone.

"I wouldn't want to pester God," a friend said to me once. Maybe none of us do. Maybe we all wonder, as the Psalmist asked God, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" (Ps. 8:4) What am *I* that you are mindful of *me*? Maybe, like my friend, we fear that we are not important enough to notice, not worthy of God's attention. That might be the reason that so many of us are in such a rush! We are always trying to be more important, to be more productive, to convince ourselves and each other of our own value. We want to be people worthy of attention. But there is nothing we need to do to earn God's attention or God's love.

The promise of this story is that Christ is always ready to turn toward us. On that Galilee road, with so many limits and demands on his time, with so many consequences for stretching out his hand, Jesus chooses to touch and heal because, to Jesus, each one of God's children *matters*. Each one of us is a beloved and beautiful child of God. Each one of us is unique and precious. The good news of this story is that you matter to God.

The challenge of this story is to go and do likewise. The challenge is to approach those interruptions and disruptions, those unexpected intrusions and inconvenient crises, those times of uncertainty and change, as moments of opportunity. The challenge is to set aside everything we think we know about God's plan for us, all of our rush and hurry, all of our ideas about who and what is important, and to turn toward our neighbours to bless and heal, to *be* blessed and healed. Because when we do that, when we take a moment, take a breath, and turn towards each other, we see Jesus, with us on the road.