

[Luke 17:11-19](#)

On the day when we first suspected Debbie might be pregnant with our first child we were on leave and in Hyde Park, attending a concert by an artist she had wanted to see for a long time, the now-deceased Meat Loaf.

I won't detain you with my thoughts about that concert, which weren't very flattering, but of course he performed a number of songs from his famous 'Bat Out Of Hell' album. Songs with lyrics such as

I want you, I need you
But there ain't no way I'm ever gonna love you
Now don't be sad
'Cos two out of three ain't bad.¹

I guess Meat Loaf did better than Jesus here. Two out of three, 66.6%, versus one out of ten, 10%. One out of ten ain't bad? Maybe that's something to remember when we worry about lack of response to the Gospel.

But what I mainly want to explore today is what this story tells us about the ministry of Jesus and how we respond to it.

Firstly, the *compassion of Jesus* crosses boundaries.

There are two ways in which the compassion of Jesus crosses boundaries. As the lepers cry out, 'Jesus, Master, have pity on us,' his heart is roused to compassion.

The first boundary is one of distance. You will notice the lepers cried out – because they were not that near him. Why? Because it was socially prescribed that lepers stayed away from the rest of the population. So they have to shout. Think about all the COVID-19 measures of the last two years, especially before there were any vaccines: keeping two metres apart, the scandal of insufficient personal protective equipment for hospital staff, and so on. These were all required to keep us as safe a distance as possible from transmitting the virus to one another.

Now imagine you had to live with such restrictions for the whole of your life. Imagine too that you had to live outside the boundary of your town, where your only company was with your fellow sufferers. Think about the effect that would have on you – emotionally, socially, and in other ways. The compassion of Jesus crosses that.

The second boundary is about the distance created by geographical borders. We read here that Jesus was travelling 'along the border between Samarian and Galilee' (verse 11). Is it so surprising, then, to hear later in the story that one of the lepers is a Samaritan?

It is our task as the church to carry on the compassion of Jesus today. How tempting it is for us to keep it within the boundaries of the church family, with people we know, where we usually feel safe, and where we hope and expect people will support us.

Now that is a rose-tinted view of the church – some of the most virulent criticisms, character assassinations, and use of defamatory language have come inside church circles.

We need to be ready to cross boundaries with Christian compassion, just as Jesus did. To be like him we must take risks and demonstrate his compassion not just in the church but in the world also.

That's why our Baptist friends are starting a course to help people face and overcome financial difficulties. That's why our Anglican friends have run bereavement ministries, as well as their community fridge that helps prevent food going to landfill. That's why one Saturday morning a month you can see 'Healing On The Streets' based in our high street, offering prayer for people. That's why we run the clothes bank.

But just because things are happening doesn't mean we can be complacent. We cannot sit and think, well so-and-so and so-and-so are operating something from our church, we don't need to get involved. We do!

Do we already know someone or a group of people outside the church who need the compassion of Jesus? Or is his Holy Spirit drawing us to care for others?

Jesus went into the broken places to meet broken people with the love of God. Is that what we are doing?

Secondly, the *ministry of Jesus* is to the whole person.

How does Jesus heal? Here there is no laying on of hands, nor does he speak to the illness and rebuke it. All he says is, 'Go, show yourselves to the priests' (verse 14). The healing happens while they are on their way to the priests.

For one thing, the mere fact of physical healing by Jesus puts paid to the idea that we should confine ourselves to what is 'spiritual' and not concern ourselves with physical or material matters. It's a criticism levelled at the church when we get involved in politics or when we have to spend time on practicalities.

But we cannot divorce the physical or the social from the spiritual. They are all inter-linked. Christians speak of human existence being a 'psychosomatic unity' – that is, soul and body are bound together in the one human person.

The mere act of healing shows Jesus' concern for all that he created. It is a concern he calls us to share.

And why does he send the lepers to the priests? You may know that in that society the priests were the ones who could declare someone cured from leprosy. If they did so declare, then a sufferer's social isolation as I described in the first point was over. No longer would they suffer socially and emotionally by being cut off from human contact. They could embrace their family again and experience the healing power of touch. They could take their place in society again. They could have the dignity of earning a living once more. They could share in worship with others as they had done before.

The healing of Jesus is physical and social as well as spiritual. Thus our expression of his ministry in the world today needs to be similar.

Of course, we have to be careful not simply to be another social agency. We need to find ways to show why we are showing God's love in material and social ways. We need to express the reason for the hope that is in us, as the New Testament puts it.

I'm not suggesting we only give material and social help on condition of people hearing a gospel presentation – I have heard of churches that do that and it's a form of manipulation. But I am saying that there should be something about the way we freely offer the love and mercy of God to all and sundry, regardless of whether they share our faith or not, that should end up prompting questions about why we might do such a thing.

One place where we have an opportunity for that is at our annual Christmas party for elderly and lonely people. We have always offered that event free of charge, and people have often wanted to give a donation towards the costs. How easy it would be for us to say to our guests on that afternoon, there is a

reason we offer this for free, and it is to do with the God we believe in. We believe he freely offers his love to us: we don't pay our way into heaven. We could leave people thinking about the Gospel on that Sunday afternoon.

Thirdly, *faith in Jesus* needs to be active.

To be scrupulously fair, you could say that all ten lepers put their faith into action, because they all obey Jesus' command to go and show themselves to the priests. In that their healing comes.

But as we heard, only one returned praising God to Jesus. And that one was not a Jew but a Samaritan (verses 15-16) – someone with decidedly dodgy theological convictions in the view of typical Jews. He had God and where and how to worship God all wrong. Yet he is held up by Jesus as the exemplar of faith (verses 17-19).

So what is the difference between the Samaritan and the nine Jews? Surely it's gratitude. That's why the Samaritan returns. The other nine have got what they want out of Jesus and off they go.

How easy it is for us to treat faith in Jesus like the nine Jewish ex-lepers with their conventional, 'correct' beliefs about God. If we are not careful, we end up using faith to get what we want or need out of it without bowing at the feet of Jesus as the heretical Samaritan did.

An obvious area where this manifests is in those people who complain after a morning service that they never got much out of it. They came to get, not to give. Worship is a giving experience.

The same people and others will complain that they are not being fed spiritually. Yet what are they doing to feed themselves? Yes, the shepherd is meant to feed the sheep, but in the process the sheep themselves learn how to feed. But some people in our churches just want everything put on a plate for them. It's selfish and un-Christlike.

Instead, a true active faith like that of the healed Samaritan is one that is characterised by gratitude. When we know what Jesus Christ has done for us the faithful response is gratitude. Gratitude seen in our commitment to regular worship. Gratitude in nurturing our own personal connection with him in prayer. Gratitude in recognising that as he laid down his life for us so the fitting response is to lay ours down for him. And that is why a 'take, take, take' attitude is so unworthy of the Christian.

But the grateful faith of someone who lays down their life for the One who died for them will not stay in splendid isolation in the church but cross boundaries with the love of God for others.

That same laid-down life in gratitude will show that love of God in physical, material, and social ways, all because of the spiritual connection with Christ.

Are we among the nine out of ten? Or are we the one out of ten?

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