

Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall

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From Isolation to Gratitude: Seeing and being Seen the bigger picture

We live in a big city with plenty of people around us and are more ways to communicate than ever before, but more people are feeling lonely than ever before.

The pandemic has increased feelings of loneliness and isolation.

It has changed how we connect.

Feeling isolated and alone for a human being is difficult because we are social beings, we need each other.

Spare a thought for the ten lepers in the story today who were experiencing the most intense isolation. These were people excluded completely from society

In ancient times anyone with a skin condition whether it be leprosy, Hansen's disease or psoriasis, eczema or anything else could be excluded from society because of the fear of it being infectious.

These people were isolated from their community and were not able to see family or friends or to live in the town where they grew up.

It is not that long ago that this was still the case for people suffering with leprosy and were sent off to islands to live.

We have had a glimpse into what isolation is like after our experience of the pandemic and lockdowns when we were unable to see each other.

I wonder what that has felt like for you? It often feels like no one else understands your situation and that you are carrying it alone. It can feel like no one sees you or recognizes you. (I think this is what is happening with asylum seekers and the women and children in Syria – out of sight is out of mind).

The ten lepers are in a terrible situation crying out to Jesus for help whilst keeping their distance.

Jesus is travelling through a border region between one country and another, a place that was isolated and encounters these people on the margin.

Jesus master, have mercy on us they cry. They cry out their need for help.

Jesus saw them.

Instead of ignoring them and walking by Jesus saw them. He took notice. This is what we most need - Someone who says to us I see you I hear you I understand you.

He responds by telling them to go see the priests.

For anyone to return to society in those days had to have a clean bill of health from the priests that they were clean, and could resume their place in society.

All 10 turn to do what Jesus asks and as they go, they are made clean.

The problem here is how we make sense of what happens next. Nine keep going and one turns back praising God and expresses

thanks to Jesus and is praised for it and Jesus asks where the other 9

Didn't Jesus tell them all to go to the priest?

Aren't 9 of them doing what Jesus asked them to do?

I think the difference is that the one leper saw that he was healed.

He recognized the transformation that had taken place.

This is what causes him to turn back and praise God.

For all of them the pull to return to family and their community and normal life as quickly as possible would have been so strong.

This can so easily undermine the awareness of what has just happened and realise it's significance.

The one Samaritan man recognizes God's action in his life and expresses thanks and prostates himself before Jesus.

He has not just been made clean but has been made whole – a depth of healing that leads him to gratitude.

His experience of leprosy, his experience of illness, deformity, poverty and isolation. It was a virtual death sentence.

To be released from that would have been overwhelming and would be enough for anyone to dance for joy.

I remember after the big car accident being amazed that I was still alive. It was as if I had taken for granted the gift of my own life.

Suddenly I realised what an astonishing gift it was to be alive and I was so thankful.

This story says something about the role of gratitude in faith.

It is easy to take for granted the blessings we do experience in life.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by what is happening in life that we fail to recognize where God is active in our lives.

We can be overcome by impatience or fear or busy -ness where we are rushing to the next thing. Monkey mind - the inner voices of fear can take over.

Sometimes it is only when we stop that we can recognise where God is at work.

The other invitation in this story is that the one leper's life had been enlarged by his transformation. His life experience suddenly was on a bigger canvas. No longer was he defined by his illness or situation but was seen and recognized as a human being who belonged. He was loved.

Perhaps when we are struggling it can be helpful to stand back and see the bigger picture that we are more than the struggle we are experiencing or our current difficulties.

We are not defined by what we lack but by the fact that we are loved by God, are seen by God and are held in God's hand and have the gift of life.

When we can give thanks for the gift of life and that in the end we are with God forever, everything else looks different.

Karl Barth was a great German theologian who wrote great tomes said that the basic human response to God is gratitude – not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving – what else can we say to what God gives us but to stammer praise.

This is what we are doing every Sunday when we gather for the eucharist. Eucharist means thanksgiving. We gather to remember that all we have is gift and to thank God for God's love and mercy.

The last hymn we will sing today is one of my favourites.

Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices.

What you may not know is the circumstances in which this hymn was written. Rinkhart wrote this at the end of the 30 year war in the 17th century.

He was the pastor of a small town that was hit by the plague as well as the 30 year war. He would read the funeral service over 40 or 50 dead at once. And he lost his whole family to the plague.

Yet he still had the trust in God for the gift of life and wrote this hymn.

Perhaps one invitation of this passage is to pause at the end of the day and to think about where has God met me today?

What am I grateful for from today?

There is something life giving about gratitude.

Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. -Melody Beattie

Now thank we all our God
with hearts and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom the world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

Lections:
Jeremiah 29.1,4-7
Psalm 66.1-11
2 Timothy 2.8-15
Luke 17.11-19