

Prayer

Almighty God and Lord of all history, we call on You to make Yourself known through what is happening in the world around us. Give us eyes to see Your love, Your justice, Your mercy and Your guidance all around us. Give us the wisdom to explain it to a world in need of understanding and direction; in the name of our Saviour Jesus, we pray; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: 'New beginnings'

The psalmist (Ps. 33:3, 96:1, 98:1) asks us to sing a 'new song' to the Lord. Ask the Lord to give you a new and refreshing spirit of praise, to encourage and bless your soul.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for all who live in polluted cities where a short life is expected*
 - *Praise God for His mercy in keeping you safe as you travel*
 - *Continue to pray about the tensions over Iran and its elections*
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Meditation

Lord, when there is nothing left and I feel poured out like water;
I come to You to renew my soul.

Lord, when my bones ache with weariness, stress and toil;
I come to You to heal my body.

Lord, when I have lost my way and fail to find my direction;
I come to You for clear guidance.

Lord, when the repetitive nature of my earthly life oppresses me;
I come to you for full restoration.

Lord, when I am troubled by the things I see around me every day;
I come to You for the peace of Your love.

Lord, when the people around me fail to see me for who I am;
I come to You to affirm my soul.

Lord, when the world has lost its way and I do not know where to go;
I come to You to find direction.

Because You never let me down!

Bible Study - Mark 1:40-45

⁴⁰ A leper came to Jesus, and he knelt down and implored Him, 'If you so wish, you have the power to make me clean.' ⁴¹ Full of emotion, He stretched out His hand touched him, and said to him; 'I do so wish. Be clean!' ⁴² The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. ⁴³ Then He spoke to him strictly and dismissed him, ⁴⁴ 'See that you say nothing to anyone about this,' He said, 'but go and show yourself to the priest and offer what Moses requires for your cleansing, as evidence for them. ⁴⁵ However, when he left, he began to make it generally known, and he spread the news around so that Jesus could no longer enter a city openly. Instead, He stayed outside in more deserted regions. Nevertheless, people continued to come to Him from everywhere.

Review

Our reading today is the last healing story from the burst of activity with which Jesus' ministry began. There was a growing demand within Capernaum and Galilee for Jesus to perform more healings, and this time, Jesus heals a man with leprosy. The man was an outcast because of the stigma of his disease; he was

regarded as ritually 'unclean' and therefore unable either to live with his family or take part in normal community life. He certainly needed healing, yet more than that, he needed to be cleansed so that he could regain his life and place in the community (1:40). The ancient laws declaring leprosy 'impure' were designed to protect people from disease in days before medicine, and although the stigma was terrible, it is not too difficult to understand the social dilemma presented by leprosy.

Everything that had happened in Jesus' ministry so far comes together in this event, and Mark tells the story as a summary of those early days. The growth of Jesus' healing ministry was entirely understandable, for sick people always seek a healer. Nevertheless, Jesus was acutely aware of His higher call firstly to preach the message of the Gospel, and also to enable people to engage with Him through faith and repentance.

Concerned for this greater work, Jesus withdrew from the crowds and prayed (1:35), and after this, He continued His ministry by both preaching and healing in greater Galilee (1:39). So when the leper came and knelt before Jesus to ask Him for healing (1:40), Jesus was faced not just with the man's need for healing, but with a failing religious system that was denying people access to their God.

To begin with, the leper came to Jesus on bended knee (1:40), and this was no simple gesture. It was the posture used by people when worshipping God, and it is the first indication in the Gospel that people were beginning to wonder who Jesus really was. Was He the Son of God? Jesus' response to this is interesting. Verse 14 describes Him as being 'full of emotion', and you will find that different versions of the Bible say quite different things; 'filled with compassion' (N.I.V.) or 'moved with pity' (N.R.S.V.) What Mark wrote here is not as clear as we might like, so we cannot be clear about His exact emotions. Nevertheless, something about this stirred Jesus' spirit, and He immediately went to heal him (1:41); he touched the man, spoke to him, and healed him instantly (1:41,42).

This much is what we would expect, but not what comes next! Jesus then spoke very strongly to the leper (1:44) and commanded him to refrain from speaking about what had happened; Jesus added that he should go to the local priests so that he could be formally declared clean, according to Jewish law. However, instead of doing this, he began to speak to everyone else about his experiences! Consequently, through the disobedience of this healed leper, Jesus' healing ministry was known further afield, and Jesus was forced to leave the cities and live out in the open, away from the crowds (1:45). Jesus' famous phrase comes to mind 'foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head ...' (Matt 8:20, Luke 9:58).

Why did Jesus withdraw, and what was really going on in His mind? We will find some answers to this as we read on in the Gospel, however, the important features of the story is Jesus' deeply emotional response to human need set against the inflexibility of a religious system supposed to give people help and succour. People were crying out, literally, for release from the oppressions of sickness, but also from being bound by religious rules. The leper's response to his healing showed this perfectly; he did not go to the priests, because he had received from Jesus what he needed, and to him, the religious system was irrelevant! Jesus saw all this, and as people continued to come to Him (1:45), He also continued to heal out of compassion, but longed for people to repent, and have faith in Him. What was at stake was not personal health, but life and death in the Kingdom of God.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss the possible emotions of Jesus in dealing with this leper. What would He have felt and why?
2. Why did Jesus feel it important for the man to go and obtain ritual forgiveness from local priests, and what do you think He felt when the leper was disobedient?
3. Jesus appears to be cautious about the large crowds; why would this be so, and why did Jesus go into the wilderness to avoid people?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Healing ministry is not just about delivering miracles. Certainly, miracles are valuable, and they are used by God to draw people to Himself in various ways and for a variety of reasons. However, even if many people are 'healed', the greatest healing is always a form of liberation that brings new life to the individual both in the present and in the future. A simple cure will effect immediate help for some, but many chronically ill people struggle with their illness because it affects life at many levels. Healing a sickness may be only the beginning of what is required. Also, what point is there in offering healing without offering the ultimate liberation of God's saving power through faith in Jesus. Only this healing lasts forever!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *What connections exist between your health and everything else that happens in your life? It is tough to ask this question, but it is wise for us to consider it. Health affects everyone in different ways, and the more we understand how and why we react to it as we do, the more we will understand other people and their needs.*
- *Pray for those who are sick, especially those you know who are in your family, at work, or in the fellowship of your church. Pray that God will use you for healing and blessing other people according to the ministry He has given you.*

Final Prayer

Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Friend; give us peace in the midst of strife, joy in the midst of unhappiness, and grace in the midst of trouble. In this way, may we know your love and affection, and may we never take it for granted. AMEN
