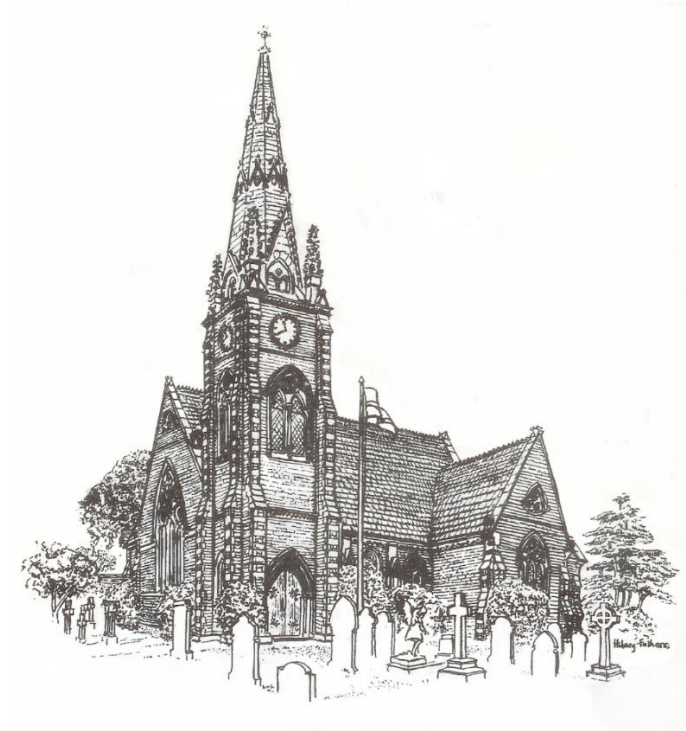


All Saints' Thornton Hough



**Lent 2021: On the Bible's back roads
Where old stories and our stories meet.**

Week 5

Wednesday March 17th: The Man healed of Leprosy: [Luke 17:11-19](#): 'Were not all ten cleansed?'

These days a journey from Samaria to Galilee would entail crossing the wall separating the Palestinian West Bank from Israel, something that many Palestinians are unable to do. For safety reasons pilgrims travelling from Jerusalem to Galilee have to drive east down to Jericho, near to the border with Jordan, and then turn north rather than take a more direct route.



Even back in the time of Jesus it wasn't a safe area because of the hatred that could be traced all the way back to the time of the separate kingdoms over nine hundred years previously. This border area was a risky place to be travelling (the context for the Parable of the Good Samaritan). The best part of a thousand years is a very long time to be bearing grudges!

Graffiti on Security Wall separating Israel from the West Bank

There is a clear link back in this story to Jesus's earlier parable (Luke 10 v 25 37) because in both cases the unexpected hero is a Samaritan. In Jesus' parable a member of that community goes to enormous lengths to care for a half dead Jewish man who was supposed to be his sworn enemy and in the real world setting of our passage the only one of ten men healed of leprosy who bothers to come back to thank Jesus is a Samaritan (v 16). This means we have to consider this passage from two different perspectives.

Firstly and most obviously it is about the need to be thankful. We can imagine all ten of those healed by Jesus being caught up in the excitement of being able to return to their families after months, if not years, of exclusion and isolation. The impact of this on their mental health is reflected in the intensity of their pleas for restoration (v 12). And all ten are healed; their healing is not dependent on their returning to give thanks and leprosy does not flare up again because they went straight home. This healing is an act of unconditional love

and, as such, is done freely. The fact that it doesn't seem to have led to spectacular spiritual growth for all but one of the ten might make us doubt their faith. Yet Jesus makes it quite clear that faith did indeed play a key role in the healing (v 19), something which must surely have applied equally to the absent nine. Perhaps it was just that in the excitement of the moment and the rush to get home they simply forgot to come back and say thank you. It may even be that some of them regretted their omission later but felt that the moment had passed. Sometimes when you mean to contact a friend you haven't been in touch with for a while or write a thank you note to somebody who has helped you the longer you leave it the harder it becomes to actually do it. 'Do it now or don't do it all' is often the way it goes. Their faith may not have been as great as the Samaritan but even a small amount of faith in Jesus can apparently make a difference, something I personally find greatly comforting.

The point for us here is that true thankfulness always includes a response. In the case of this Samaritan, it meant coming back to Jesus to let him know how much what was done for him was appreciated. Many people who volunteer to work for charitable organisations such as hospices, mental health charities, cancer care centres and churches do so because they themselves received help when they really needed it and want to give something back as a way of saying thank you. There were a number of cases over the years I was involved in running the Alpha Course when people who had done the course subsequently became involved as leaders and helpers. Other people give financially to charities that have helped them in a difficult time which is another important way of saying thank you. The Holy Communion service is sometimes called 'The Eucharist' which derives from the Greek word 'eucharistia' meaning 'thanksgiving'. This means that at the heart of Christian worship is an act of thankfulness for all that Jesus has done for us. Again and again we share bread and wine, tokens of his broken and pierced body, in thankful remembrance of God's gracious and reconciling love. One significant reason Jesus left us this meal was that we would never take for granted the sacrifice that he made for us; each time the drama of the crucifixion is made real for us in bread and wine it is a reminder that it was for us and for all. Then at the end of the service we are sent out to 'live and work to his praise and glory' or to put it another way, to express our thankfulness to God in the way we serve him day by day. It's why James says that without 'works' (which, for him, very much includes caring for those in need – James 2 v 14-17) faith is moribund (James 2 v 26).

Secondly, we need to consider the implications of the Samaritan being the hero of the story. It's interesting that in calling him a foreigner (v 18) Jesus identifies himself with the Jewish race. He doesn't do this in a narrow nationalistic sense, I think, but to emphasise the omission of the other nine, who we assume to be Jewish, in failing to come back. In affirming the faith of a Samaritan Jesus is actually being counter cultural and ground breaking. We have to wait until Acts 10, when Peter is shown a vision and sent to the house of Cornelius, a gentile Roman Centurion, to find him and his fellow believers beginning to tumble to the fact that, as he puts it, '...God does not show favouritism...' (Acts 10 v 34). Convincing his Jewish followers that God wanted to bless Gentiles as well was always going to be a tough nut for Jesus to crack. Our own age is one in which nationalism, factionalism and populism are once again raising their ugly heads and triggering conflicts in places such as Nagorno Karabakh, Ukraine, Yemen, Ethiopia, Syria, South Sudan and Myanmar. The suffering this has caused to the many victims who have been killed, maimed, bereaved and forced to leave the communities they have lived in their whole lives is such that we often can't bear to look. Many other regions and individual countries are becoming bitterly divided along ethnic or political grounds – the United Kingdom and the United States of America are two good examples of where this kind of division is on the increase. The message of Jesus Christ is that we have a fundamental unity rooted in the fact that Jesus died for all regardless of race or ethnicity. This grateful Samaritan is a signpost pointing us to truths that transcend the divisions that scar our beautiful world reminding us that love, the self-giving love that we see in Jesus, must and will win the day because the risen Christ has triumphed over hate in all its forms and invited us to be citizens of an eternal kingdom of love, life and peace.

Questions: What do you need to say thank you to God for today? In what ways should living with a thankful heart shape our lives?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for all that you have done for us. Help us never to take you for granted and to respond in the giving of our lives to your service. Amen.

**Saturday March 20th: The Centurion: [Matthew 8:5-13](#):
Go! 'Let it be done just as you believed it would'**

In the main entrance of the Grosvenor Museum in Chester there is a life size model of a Roman centurion wielding his sword and looking as if he is about to strike somebody down. Centurions were battle hardened veterans responsible for training soldiers, maintaining discipline and displaying bravery and resolution on the battlefield. They had 80 men under their command and generally displayed little subtlety when it came to the aforementioned methods of training, disciplining and fighting.

Caesarea, capital of the Roman province of Judaea



Whilst the centurion in our passage may well have been serving under King Herod Antipas, Rome's client king in the province of Judaea, whose forces were organised in line with the Roman army, he was definitely a gentile (Jews were exempt from conscription) and represented, if at one remove, the might and

power of Rome. This man was not a centurion because of who he knew or where he came from; he had been promoted because he had proved himself to be an effective soldier. Or to put it another way, he was good at killing people in battle.

He is, then, a rather improbable character to be waylaying Jesus as he enters the town of Capernaum with an urgent plea on behalf of his ailing servant (v 6). Being in actual fact a slave, the servant would normally have been regarded as part of his property rather than a human being. The overwhelming majority of people in the centurion's situation wouldn't have cared whether the slave lived or died except for the inconvenience of having to buy another one. The world of the centurion was one of commanding and obeying without question and he himself was one cog in a chain of command which ultimately went all the way up to the Emperor of Rome (v 9). Just as he has to do exactly what he is told so those he commands must do the same. There was no room for sentiment of any kind – when you tell somebody to go, come or do this, they unhesitatingly obey (v 9b). If you were serving under the centurion in the heat of battle and he

commanded you to mount an attack in which you would were likely to be killed you had no choice but to do what you were told.

Yet Jesus says that this battle-scarred veteran displays deeper faith than he has yet seen in Israel (v 10). What an extraordinary statement! Not only does he display a very personal concern for someone who he regarded as a person rather a piece of property but he also believes in Jesus' ability to heal him. What this says to me is that in spite of the brutalising effects of commanding men who are killing and being killed by their enemies in battle the centurion had not lost touch with his own humanity.

In today's world both war and slavery continue to dehumanise many. It is not just those who fire bullets and drop bombs (often by pressing a button in a military complex thousands of miles away from the conflict zone) causing death and terrible injury but those whose homes and communities are devastated and whose loved ones are killed or maimed who face an all-out attack on their humanity. Modern slavery takes many forms such as human trafficking, forced labour, child slavery, forced marriage and domestic slavery. Slavery has not gone away and continues to dehumanise both its victims and its perpetrators.

This comes uncomfortably close to home when we consider firstly that because of our long history of selling arms to Saudi Arabia, many of those who are suffering in the conflict in Yemen are being targeted by weapons made in the United Kingdom and secondly that modern slavery is very much present in our society; in recent years trafficked children have been found in every local area in Britain.

One of the reasons the centurion retains his humanity and can open his heart to Jesus is that he loves the people he is supposed to feel nothing for. In Luke's version of this story, he adds the detail that local leaders come to Jesus pleading the worthiness of centurion's cause because, 'he loves our nation and has built our synagogue' (Luke 7 v 5). Perhaps the real evidence of his faith is that he is able to see over the cultural, ethnic and religious barriers of his time and understand that those living, working and worshipping on the other side of these dividing lines are as important as anyone else.

Jesus uses harsh words for those who wish to restrict the love of God (v 12) because it is not just those who consider themselves children of promise who

will be at the feast (v 11). Jesus' assertion that there will be outsiders present was certainly controversial and yet as the story ends with the healing of the centurion's servant, we see an indiscriminate outpouring of divine love in perfect harmony with his words.

One key aspect of Jesus's ministry was that he was able to make people who had been dehumanised feel fully human again. Those he healed of leprosy, for example, were not just restored to health but also to the circle of their families and friends ending for some of them long years of rejection and isolation as outsiders.

For the centurion, the local Judaeans were outsiders, he was not there to make friends but to enforce Roman rule. However, he had managed to form a relationship with the local people that was not that of oppressor and oppressed but based on a shared humanity. It is when we think of people as outsiders for whatever reason that we dehumanise them. At the same time, we dehumanise ourselves. God is an inclusive God and asks us to make that real in our daily lives and the lives of our churches.

It might be as simple as the outsider being somebody we don't know. When I was fifteen, I started attending a church youth group. Although my elder brothers had previously been members, I knew very few people in what was a large group of young people and felt very much on the outside of things. However, somebody called Andrew took me under his wing over a number of weeks. He had his own group of friends but would come over and talk, suggest a game of table tennis and basically check that I was ok. As time went by, I found my feet, my own group of friends and a living faith in Jesus. I cannot even recall Andrew's surname and have not met him for the best part of fifty years and yet he did three things for me. He made me feel welcome, affirmed me as a human being and helped me to find faith; I cannot thank him enough.

It's given me a particular sensitivity to the after-church coffee time on a Sunday morning (which will return, post pandemic!). If somebody is left standing on their own while members of church chat away in their friendship groups that person will, very justifiably, feel like an outsider – a horrible feeling. The centurion went out of his way to understand and build relationships with those who were outsiders (and to whom he was very much an outsider) meaning that there are times (Sunday morning coffee being one of them) when we will need

to go out of our way to include and welcome somebody new who may have come to church with a specific need. It's the kind of thing Jesus did both in this passage and throughout his ministry.

Questions: How might an understanding of God's love as unconditional impact our understanding of the 'good news' of Jesus? How can we live that out?

Prayer: Lord, help me to reach out to those who, for any reason, are outsiders and to offer them a welcome in your name. Amen.

Passion Sunday March 21st: The Canaanite Woman: [Matthew 15:21-28](#):
'Woman, you have great faith'



1st century style meal, Nazareth Village

Today is Passion Sunday when we think particularly about the pain and suffering that Jesus endured on his journey to the cross. Reflecting on how he overcame the dread within as he pleaded to be released from and subsequently accepted the way of suffering and death (Mat 26 v 36-44) reveals much about the love he personified.

In the light of that, what on earth is going on in today's passage? Jesus and his disciples are way up north beyond the territory of Israel when they encounter a local woman in desperate need. But it looks like at best Jesus is in no hurry to heal her daughter and at worst has no intention of helping her at all. He responds to her initial cry with silence (v 23) and then moves on to inform her that she is outside the scope of his mission (v 24) and use a racial slur against her (v 26). As Jesus does eventually release her daughter from the evil that has imprisoned her we could, at first reading, understand this encounter as a steep learning curve for him. In the end, in spite of his misgivings, he recognises her faith and responds and in doing so begins to understand that his ministry might have wider ramifications than he had realised up to this point.

The problem with this reading is that, as we saw yesterday, Jesus had already healed the servant of a Roman Centurion (Mat 8 5-13) and if we cross check with Luke's Gospel we will see that, right from the outset, he was risking his life to make the point that he had not come just to save Israel (using the widow in Zarephath and Namaan the Syrian as test cases - Luke 4 v 24-27). It nearly got him killed before he'd even got started (Luke 4 v 28-30).

It may well be that, by a process of elimination; the people who really needed to get shaken out of their racial presuppositions were his disciples. It's almost as if he deliberately gives voice to sullen silence, exclusivist thinking and racial slurs that that are present in their hearts (and given voice by their request to Jesus to get rid of her - v 23) in order to demonstrate how unacceptable they really are.

What Jesus is doing here is shoving this woman's faith under the noses of the disciples as if to say, 'what do you make of that?!' It is not the only example of shock therapy in the Gospels; his declared intention to go to his death in Jerusalem and his request to wash the feet of his disciples spring readily to mind. What seems to be happening here is that Jesus is demonstrating that real faith, the kind of faith that isn't put off by silence, exclusion or racial slurs, is to be found beyond the boundaries of Israel and in people other than those who self-identify as God's chosen people. Lost sheep can through faith be found, loved, helped and healed in Tyre and Sidon just as much as in Galilee or Jerusalem.

Once the disciples have encouraged Jesus to send this troublesome woman packing we don't hear another word from them. They stand silent as this Canaanite woman, who for them was certainly a 'dog' and who represented a society that had a long history of enmity with the people of Israel, gives voice to a deeper faith than they themselves can muster. I wonder what they are thinking.

Prejudices don't have to be at the surface to be real. Those who give voice to their bigotry by going on marches or committing hate crime are not the only ones who feel that way. It's just that most people keep it under wraps. Prejudice is where we judge people not as individuals but according to race, class, age, sexuality, disability or any other category. Yet Christians hold unequivocally to a belief that every human life is sacred because what we all have in common and binds us together as a human family is that we are made in the image of God.

This means that all those who have left their homes and communities to escape war or poverty, those of all races, ethnicities and sexualities, those with disabilities and those of all ages are family. The effect of what the disciples witnessed as Jesus appears to send this outsider back where she came from and then turns everything they have always known to be true on its head by applauding her faith and healing her daughter would have been thought provoking, to say the very least.

We must be aware that similar prejudices and assumptions about people lie deep within our own culture and its morally ambivalent past. An ancestor of mine who was a barrister at Lincoln's Inn for many years spent the last nine

years of his life as a senior legal officer in British India, still run at that time (the early nineteenth century) by the East India Company. He was a knight of the realm and, especially as he is not at all typical of my family history, which is mostly peopled by people such as agricultural labourers and bricklayers, it has been interesting to research his life. However my severe doubts about his role as an instrument of empire came to a head when a speech he made following the Third Anglo-Maratha War of 1817-18 which decisively cemented and expanded British rule in India was brought to my attention. The speech, which was to propose a motion congratulating the Governor General on his military success, reflected an unquestioned belief in the superiority of the British race and a consequent justification of a war in which many thousands of Indians were killed.

It was the inability to question his assumptions concerning racial superiority and the fact that this validated military action against people who had not asked the British to be in India in the first place which was most shocking to me. There are uncomfortable questions we all have to ask ourselves about inherited assumptions we might have failed to question and consequent prejudices lurking unacknowledged within. It is also something that churches need to address. The inclusive nature of the good news of Jesus Christ is exactly why Jesus's disciples, standing in awed and uncomfortable silence in front of a foreign woman who had just demonstrated that her faith was more inclusive than theirs, needed to be confronted and challenged.

So if we believe that God sent Jesus to die because he wants everybody to be included, there will be practical implications for the life of the church. For instance we will need to raise awkward questions, as touched on with regard to Mephibosheth, about to what extent people with disabilities are able to fully (with the emphasis firmly on the word *fully*) participate in the life of the church including all leadership roles. In my time in ministry a growing awareness of this issue led to action being taken to introduce such things as induction loops, large print service booklets and ramps enabling people with disabilities to access all areas (bearing in mind that the need to be able to climb steps to, for instance, celebrate or help distribute Holy Communion is exclusory). A fully open and inclusive Christian community is a thing of great beauty. It will reflect the passion of Christ and embody his vision of a kingdom open to the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed (Luke 4 v 18). The task for the church today is to live out the fundamental truth that God wants everybody to be

included. That's as much a challenge for God's people today as it was for the disciples during their trip up north.

Questions: What contemporary attitudes do we see in the reaction of the disciples to the Canaanite woman? How might we address them within ourselves and more widely in the church and in society?

Prayer: Lord, thank you for enduring suffering for us and for all. Help us to reflect your passionate love in all we think, say and do. Amen.