

Sermon 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2018

There is a play called 'Faith Healer' written by a man called Brian Friel. He has written numerous plays over a career that has spanned fifty years, his play 'Faith Healer' premiered in 1980 and has had many performances ever since. In the play, the title character named Frank Hardy tells of his healing ministry. As the play progresses he comes to the realisation that his healings only work some of the time. Frank ponders whether his gift is for real or not, and the play centres on his self-doubt and ponders the question why some healing works and others do not. – Friel has in a way given us a dramatisation of the long standing debate among Christians over the healing stories of Jesus for which today's gospel is a prime example.

It is a part of that debate because it is a Gospel reading that has many more questions than answers. It, like Brian Friel's play 'Faith Healer' leaves the

question of healing open-ended, and invites us to make up our minds, not always a comfortable task.

However, we are helped in some way to ponder this healing of a leper by Jesus; because we have for the past, three weeks had readings that centre on the act of healing.

Two weeks ago we had the reading from Mark 1:21-28 and it told of a man with an unclean spirit yelling out to Jesus in the Synagogue 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? To which Jesus commands the spirit to be silent and depart from the man, to the astonishment of those present.

The second healing story from last Sunday was the healing of Simon's mother in law. She has a fever so Jesus gives her his hand and lifts her up and she is healed. This leads to many bringing their sick to Jesus to be healed also.

Then we have today's account. Where Jesus heals a leper who approaches him.

There is an interesting movement in these three accounts. They have started in the Synagogue, and then moved to the house and now to the open field, where the impure ones wander. The writer of Mark has moved us through religious space through to private space then to public space. This is perhaps a deliberate act, telling us that Jesus is interested in all aspects of human life, the sacred, the private and the public.

Furthermore, they are spaces for which his 'healing ministry' has particular importance.

We know in our own experiences of modern day 'healing ministries' that they can take place in these three areas of human life. We hear of big healing crusades that come to town taking place in churches throughout the country. We know of televangelist's supposedly healing people through their televisions, as well as those times when the debate

about religious healing makes it into our headlines, normally in controversial fashion. Today's passage seems to wrestle with that idea of public space, for the healing of the leper takes place out in the world, right on the edge of society.

The very fact that Jesus is in a place where he could interact with lepers is a good starting point and of great significance. This is because Lepers suffered not just a physical illness but from a social illness: they were impure, unclean; they were a source of danger and contamination for the family.

They were not too be interacted with; they were on the outskirts for a reason.

Therefore, this narrative starts of in radical fashion. Jesus upon hearing the man's plea and reaching out to touch him does the unthinkable - he makes himself ritually unclean.

It is reminiscent of recent times when many doctors and nurses have at great personal risk cared

for those affected by Ebola in West Africa. In addition, what was interesting about that outbreak was the media coverage and international response. It displayed that when the problem does not affect us directly we are often apathetic, but when the threat changes we can suddenly become very interested. Now of course this is human nature, but human nature is one thing Jesus confronts in this passage.

For the Jewish law that kept the leper ostracised had lost its purpose, it had become a tool of exclusion, rather than a tool of restoration and compassion. Human nature had made these people not only unclean physically, but also spiritually. For the pervading theology at the time was that those with physical ailments must have been given to them by God, and therefore it was important to separate them and reject them.

However, Jesus challenges such thinking to its core. He could have healed the man from a distance, but

instead he chooses to touch him, symbolically drawing him in and shattering the traditional boundaries of purity and in the process rewrites the book on the nature of God's beloved community.

And it is by this act of breaking boundaries that he displays to us the readers that the healing miracle is only one part of his redemptive action in this passage, the other – perhaps more important action is that he reaches out and joins in solidarity with someone who is marginalised and oppressed. This it seems is our task also.

However, it is not just a task for the Synagogue, but also our homes and the public places we work and live in. Jesus models for us that the line between the sacred and the profane is less determined than we may imagine. It is the realisation that life is full of 'grey areas' when it comes to issues of healing, impurity, and our response to it. Today's gospel invites us to explore our doubts, and our fears, to be

honest with ourselves when it comes to issues like healing and social boundaries.

Perhaps in response we may be feeling a lot like our friend Frank Hardy from 'Faith Healer', full of self-doubt and anxiety. Some of us may have more questions than answers. But that is okay. For this passage enables us – even gives us permission to approach God a new. Perhaps like our leper from today's gospel – we need to approach Jesus and ask those difficult questions, for he does respond, and more often than not he reaches down to us and touches us, and perhaps sometimes, as in this passage, that is enough.