

Trinity 14

“save this stranger” (Gospel)

We use the word “leprosy” for a different disease to the one used by the ancients, but there is no gain in being pedantic. At this time we might imagine that the exclusion of lepers from the community was a form of quarantine, lest infection be spread. But probably not. The point in the Old Testament (and the Samaritans accepted the books of the Law, so this applies to them as much as to Jews) is that the community as a place of God's dwelling has to be kept holy, so any thing or person which pollutes that holiness must be kept outside it. This does not mean that lepers are sinners (though they may be); merely that for the present God has rejected them as in a state incompatible with his holiness. If they are healed (made whole), they will of course be restored to the community, and the appropriate rituals exist to do this.

So Jesus heals ten lepers. It is sadly natural for us to be agitated about the possibility of miraculous healings. The ancient world took them for granted. There were many healing shrines and these (while also having doctors) would make much of the healings which were not due to medical work but to the intervention of the god concerned. The Gospels do not imagine that healings are a monopoly of Jesus. Elijah and Elisha had healed, even raised the dead. In the Acts of the Apostles healing power is used by the Apostles – even by Paul. The fact of the healing is barely interesting. As a result, the descriptions of the healing tend to be quite formulaic; just enough to establish that there was a well-known illness, an intervention by the healer, and a publicly attested cure.

The Gospels are less interested in the fact of the healing (though they sometimes preserve technical details) than in the meaning of it. So we can attempt to see what Luke thought was important.

The healing is the restoration of the lepers to their holy community. They are to go to the priests, who will certify the cure and restore them to participation in the Assembly (the synagogue is a meeting and only secondarily a building where the meeting takes place. Healing is not just a bodily matter; it implies (in this case) belonging to a spiritual community.

There is an element of faith; the lepers are given a task. To go to the priests is to enter the zone of holiness. It would be wrong (a breach of the Law) to enter that zone unless they were healed. So they have to set out in the faith that by the time they enter they will have been healed. The task is less than bathing seven times in Jordan (2 Kings 5) but still they have to trust that performing that task will be effective.

However, we are not in the realm of magic here. If we were, then turning back to give thanks would break the spell and undo the cure. It does not. God does not punish for a natural and appropriate response. It is implied that the nine ought also to have given thanks at once. If we decide to imagine what Luke does not say, they might have thought first complete the task then of course give thanks to God. Equally, and again what Luke does not say, the giving of thanks, though commended, does not let the man off from completing the task.

Luke has been at pains to emphasise that he is a Samaritan, a stranger. One closely enough connected to Judaism to know what “shew yourself to the priests” means and to do it (presumably to Samaritan priests) yet one with whom pious Jews would prefer not to have dealings. Luke here and elsewhere finds and records stories which show Jesus extending his mercy and the Gospel beyond Judaism; and the Samaritans were the first available extension. This is a sign that such stories are genuine, for by the time of Luke's writing, and particularly in view of his Gentile status and involvement in Paul's mission to the Gentiles, they were not very important – the nature of the dispute had changed.

So this is less a healing story than a story of appropriate response and of God's own generosity as exercised by Jesus. All the healings are in some sense about Jesus' authority. He exercises the authority of his Father; and if in healings, then also in the forgiveness of sins. In this case, if the Father will allow a Samaritan to be healed, who are we to question God? And if there is a healing, better that we give thanks than dispute about how it was achieved.