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EPIPHANY 6B

Jesus cleanses the leper

We would all no doubt like to see or experience the sort of miraculous healing displayed in today's story!

As I look back however, there are very few instances I can recall from 28 years in parish ministry that would fall into this category.

Although these events seemed wonderful at the time, I have no way of knowing if the healing was lasting because in most cases I lost touch with the people. I trust they went on to live long and fruitful lives — but I have no way of knowing!

BUT In all case of healing that I know of, there were many other factors involved.

Just recently, Sandy was suffering terrible stomach cramps with debilitating pain on a regular basis! Then two or three months after she retired from work (a job which she loved, but which had considerable stress due to the working relationships) she realised that she had not had one of these painful episodes since. It was a healing we attributed to the removal of that stress.

But it was also a healing which had the touch of God's Spirit about it too. It meant Sandy was free to do the things she wanted to do. I suppose what I am saying is that in getting in touch with her own spirit, and her own needs, Sandy was also opening herself up to the Grace of God's healing for her.

My point is that God's healing works in all sorts of ways and not all of them are immediate ... although nonetheless "miraculous".

Other interventions are also works of God's healing grace:

- Counselling can be the way in which people find the answers and direction which help them see life in a new way!
- Renewing friendships and relationships can be a source of God's grace!
- Spiritual advice can also serve to redirect a person into discovering God's healing! I recall a woman I visited many years ago because I had heard she was ill. After talking and listening for some time, and affirming her as well as praying, she thanked me and said "I feel so much better and it didn't cost me anywhere near as much as Dr. So and So." Now please don't think I am against medical intervention! Far from it!
- Sometimes a disaster, a crisis, a breakdown can bring a person to the point of beginning to find ever so slowly, God's healing.

Recently someone I know who had been sexually abused as a child caused great trauma by getting drunk and (at last!) admitting it in a swearing and cursing episode what had happened to him as a young man.

Things did not suddenly get better — in fact he has just had another run in with the police — but at last everything is out in the open and may open up some resolution for him in the longer term!

I can recall also a woman telling me about her son whose relationship with

his absent father had been very difficult and how the boy was close to being prescribed anti-depressants. One night while driving she was able to help him express his anger about this poor relationship. She was able to give him permission to behave like that more often when he felt it was building up, so was able to bring something of God's grace of forgiveness and healing to the situation! Crisis can be healing!

As I write this I am very aware that **SIN** is very much involved in all these situations — the sin of alienation of broken relationships!

- The sin of denial and repressed anger!
- The great sin of child abuse and sexual abuse!
- The sin of our own arrogance and self-sufficiency (believing we can do it on our own).

I am also aware of the wonderfully "normal" ways in which God's healing grace is discovered or made known. For me this is the epiphany for this week!

It seems to me that this is what is happening in the story of Jesus and the man with leprosy and the story of Naaman of Aram. (in my younger day he was Naaman the Syrian! But now he is from Aram!)

The story of Jesus and the man with leprosy occurs immediately after the sample Sabbath Day in the life of Jesus.

It seems like Mark is reporting it here to show the power of Christ will deal **EVEN WITH LEPROSY!** This claim would have been a fitting climax to the story for Mark's hearers because leprosy as well as being "a loathsome and disfiguring disease, involved ritual uncleanness and complete segregation from the community and religious life of Israel. The Law could do nothing for the leper; it could only protect the rest of the community against him. Moreover, it is probably significant that according to the rabbis, the healing of leprosy was 'as difficult as the raising of the dead'." (DE Nineham "St Mark" — Penguin).

The point of the story is that in the religion of the Old Testament, the Law could not help the man **BUT** the grace of healing, forgiveness and restoration of Christ could!

In fact, all illness was deemed (by the thinking of the day) to represent sin or separation from God, and leprosy was the example "par excellence" of this. Even the story of Naaman points out that he can be healed only if he submits to the God of Israel. It is his (albeit reluctant) agreement to turn and accept Elisha's conditions which signifies this!

Naaman thought that the greatness of Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, should indicate that they would do the trick for God, but it is in the simplicity of the request that lies the answer!

The way Jesus deals with the man is also simple. In response to the man's approach "If you choose, you can make me well" Jesus, moved with pity, stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be

made clean." Touching a leper would be unthinkable, but not to Jesus. His touch is an inclusive, restorative action!

The necessity to go to the priest was paramount because the priest was also the expert in community health and had the authority to give the man a clean bill of health.

Even Jesus did not circumvent the health system! He knew that for the man to be reinstated to his family and community and faith community, he needed verifiable proof.

I see a pattern here!

- Both Naaman and the man with Jesus spoke their need.
That requires awareness of one's need AND willingness to tell someone — to express that need. They sought help and I believe in that very act they opened themselves up to God.
- Both Naaman and the leper sought help from the agent of God. Naaman from Elisha and the other man from Christ. In talking to another they opened up to the grace of God in the other; to the possibility of something happening. There is a combination of the human touch and the divine spirit here! We might be reminded that whoever we talk to will have something of both to offer. It may even be a "wake up to yourself" rather than a gentle response. But it is also about prayer! Going to God with our needs!
We need also the prayer of discernment as we seek to understand God's word in the words of those around us. Talk to friends and Talk to God and LISTEN!
- In both cases the requirements are simple!
We are reminded that so often God's answers are simple — have a rest, talk to a friend, eat better meals, take a walk, go for a swim — even though we like to look for the grand and wonderful. Even then we don't ignore the health professionals who can diagnose and guide.

When I started this sermon I just started writing, so I have just looked back to see where and how it all started!

By the miracle of 'cut and paste' I can now tell you that I said:

As I look back however, there are very few instances I can recall from 28 years in parish ministry that would fall into this category of immediate miraculous healing.

What I would say is that at the heart of any healing process is the healing of discovering that God's grace is at work in the simple and seemingly insignificant — the touch of a hand, the care of a friend, a truthful word kindly spoken — and therein lies the miracle through which God is free to act.