

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups 1st February 2009

Good News – for those who think God is not willing get involved and act! Matt 8:1-5



If you suffered from leprosy in the first century it meant that you were a 'non person,' an outcast. Physically, socially and religiously you were repugnant. You would have been strictly forbidden to be anywhere near anyone else and were considered to be unclean in every sense. There was no hope for you and even if there was a one in a million chance that you had remission, the obstacles of elaborate rituals involving sacrifice and anointing with oil and water over a period of time meant that integration back into the mainstream was still a virtual impossibility. To discover you had leprosy was bad news indeed, the very worst news you could ever receive. You were consigned to the living dead! So it was the last chance saloon for the leper when he heard that Jesus was in town. Breaking the law and all conventions that bound him he broke through the crowd and begged Jesus "if you are willing Lord, you can make me clean!" And the Lord said to the leper "Sorry but actually I can't really get involved, hope you don't mind" and went on his way leaving the leper bitter, disappointed and alone as the crowd moved on!

Well of course we know that wasn't the case! Mark in his account tells us that Jesus was "filled with compassion" (1:41). He was deeply moved – the Greek implies a mix of compassion, pity, anger and love: a love for the man in this place of suffering, an anger at the dreadful effects of his illness. The Gospel writers go on to tell us that Jesus reached out and touched the man. In one simple act Jesus identified completely with the leper, he broke the rules and became like the leper – as a result of this, according to Jewish law, Jesus became unclean to. And finally Jesus said to the leper "yes I am willing – be clean!"

With his heart – Jesus was moved with compassion. With his hand – Jesus reached out. With his voice – Jesus said I am willing. This is the Good News of the Incarnation – the heart of our faith. God with us...and yet if we are honest many of us do not experience Jesus in this way, we do not know Jesus like that. We struggle at work, we juggle our responsibilities at home and we rush from one thing to the next with barely time to breathe. So much of the time the Jesus we seem to know is the "sorry but actually I can't really get involved, hope you don't mind" Christ which leaves us bitter, disappointed and alone as the crowd moves on. However this kind of absent Christ is nothing more than a figment of our imagination for if God is not willing to get involved and act through his Son, if he is not willing through heart, hand and voice to be involved in the nitty gritty everyday mess of our daily lives he is no God at all Any faith in an unwilling Saviour is in effect an extravagant waste of time!

The Good News of the gospel is that through Jesus Christ God is willing to hear our cry to him, he is willing to touch our lives, he is willing to make us clean. He is willing and able to bring love and forgiveness, healing and wholeness, direction and purpose if we would let him! In reality the leper had nothing to lose and everything to gain but it was still risky business for him to come out of the crowd and lay himself before Jesus. It may be the same for us – we can stay within the comparative safety of the parameters we've drawn around Jesus; we can stay within the confines of our own problems, fighting our own battles or we can step out of the crowd and say "Lord if you are willing..." The adventure of faith will be different for each one of us in the complex lives we lead by the words of Christ are always the same "I am willing."



Witness: questions to discuss

Guidance: Before discussion read the Bible passage, ask God to help you discern what the Spirit wants to say to your group. Consider one or two questions below – don't feel you have to use them all! Make sure there's plenty of room for prayer and ministry.

1. Thinking of first century attitudes towards lepers share any times you may have felt like a non-person!
2. Jesus was "filled with compassion" – what situations particularly fill you with compassion – that mix of pity anger and love? What can you do about them?
3. Do you ever feel that God is not willing to get involved and act?
4. Have you recently felt let down by God? Disappointed with faith/Church/small Group! What do we do with such feelings?
5. Do you think that you/ we /the Church have drawn safe parameters around Jesus? What can we do?
6. What areas do you think that you/we/the Church need to open up to and ask Jesus "Lord if you are willing?"
7. Be honest ! How would it feel for you stepping out of the crowd and asking " Lord if you are willing"
8. Taking it further: What would your response be to the riposte "If your God is really willing and able what is he doing about Aids, cancer the homeless and poverty and indiscriminate suffering?"