



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany St. Matthew 8:1-13 Fr. William Klock

February 2, 2025

Have you ever met someone with leprosy? Probably not. Today it's extremely rare. We hardly give it a thought. But in the ancient world it was one of the most dreaded diseases. It began with the loss of feeling in your extremities and nodules that would turn into ulcers. The loss of feeling spread. The ulcers never healed. Your hair would fall out and your eyes would go blind. Ulcers would form on your vocal cords, leaving your voice hoarse and rasping. Gangrene would set in. Eventually you would lose fingers and toes and sometimes whole limbs. Sometimes it led to madness. Eventually it would lead to death, but not quickly. Some forms of leprosy would take a decade to run their course and others twenty or thirty years.

But as bad, if not worse than the physical misery was the fact that it was contagious. That made lepers outcasts. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that lepers were treated "as if they were, in effect, dead men". When a person was diagnosed with leprosy, they were immediately banished from family and community. In Leviticus 13:46 the Lord had commanded, "He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp." And people didn't get better from leprosy. That's why it was a *miracle* when the Lord intervened to heal Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy. Consider that in medieval Europe, before he was cast out, a leper was brought to the church one last time so the priest could read the *burial service*

over him. So to be a leper was, for all intents and purposes, to be dead. Not, of course, to yourself, but dead to your family, your friends, and your community. In Israel lepers were barred from Jerusalem and from any walled town or city. The law described over sixty types of contact that would render a person unclean and contact with a leper was second only to contact with a dead body. If a leper so much as poked his head through the door of your house, your house would be rendered unclean. One rabbi boasted that he threw stones at lepers to keep them at a distance, because that's where they belonged. Keep that in mind as we look again at today's Gospel. Look with me at Matthew 8:1-4.

When Jesus came down from the mountain, large crowds followed him. Suddenly a leper came to him and knelt down in front of him. "Lord," he said, "if you want, you can make me clean!" Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. "I do want to," he said. "Be clean!" And at once his leprosy was cleansed. "Take care," Jesus said to him, "that you don't say anything to anyone. Instead, go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering which Moses commanded. That will be the proof to them."

For the last three chapters Jesus has been preaching the Sermon on the Mount. So he's been preaching to the crowds about the kingdom of God—what it's going to be like and who's going to be part of it. And I can imagine the people in the crowd nodding in approval as they listened—but the real weight of it not really sinking in. It's often like that when he hear God's word. Something like "Love your neighbour." We agree. We think, "Oh, that's good." But the real radicalness of it doesn't sink in. And then something happens—we're faced with a choice, we encounter a person—and the Spirit brings that lesson to mind and we realise just how much God and the gospel expect of us. Sometimes we fail the test. Imagine

the crowd that had been listening to Jesus preach, now following him into town and this leper approaches Jesus. And everything Jesus has been saying about the kingdom is forgotten. People are thinking, "Stupid leper! Doesn't he know he shouldn't be here! How dare he come so close to the rabbi!" They've just heard Jesus preaching at length about the kingdom, but I expect at least *some* of them saw the leper and were thinking to themselves that if Jesus were a good rabbi, he would tell this man to take a hike—to obey *torah* and get out of town—maybe even throw rocks at him.

Imagine their surprise when instead of quoting Leviticus at the man and telling him to get lost, Jesus stops as the man kneels at his feet. That says something right there. When this leper saw Jesus he saw the Messiah. Jews didn't prostrate themselves before any old person. This posture was reserved for the Lord. In some way, shape, or form he saw in Jesus the God of Israel. And with his hoarse and damaged voice he rasps out, "Lord, if you want, you can make me clean! Please make me clean." And to their horror, Jesus reaches out and touches the man. The law said that a leper could come no closer to a healthy person than a cubit and Matthew makes a point describing Jesus reaching out, stretching out his arm to its full length across that distance to bridge the gap between himself and the leper, so that he could make contact with him, to touch the untouchable, to draw in the outcast. And Jesus says to him, "I want just that. Be clean."

Uncleanness *should* have passed from the leper to Jesus. Obviously you couldn't see something like that, but everyone knew that that was the law, ever since the Lord had spoken it through Moses. Touch a leper and you become unclean. So imagine their surprise when they *did* see something happen. They saw *cleanness* pass *from* Jesus *to* the leper. As they watched the man was healed. His

sores healed and disappeared. His sight cleared. His voice became whole again. Maybe fingers and toes even grew back before their watching eyes. The leprosy was gone. The man was restored. His death sentence was lifted.

Now, the sermon on the mount wasn't just an abstract ethical manifesto that Jesus delivered to a group of people who could have been from anywhere or any time. It was a declaration that the kingdom of God had come in fulfilment of the prophets, a declaration that the Messiah had finally come to set God's people to rights. They desperately need and longed for that. Ever since they had been called in Abraham, ever since they had, as a nation, been adopted by the Lord as his covenant people, they had in one way or another failed him and failed to be the people he had called and delivered them to be. They gave their hearts to idols. They gave their hearts to kings. They put their trust in horses and chariots. They oppressed the widow and the orphan and took advantage of the poor and the stranger. Their rabbis threw stones at lepers who dared get too close. The nation had repeatedly known the Lord's discipline. The faithful remnant amongst the people had cried out for centuries to the Lord for help and through the prophets he had promised that he would come, that he would deliver, that he would forgive, that he would put his own Spirit in the hearts of his people and turn them away from sin and self and fill them with love for him and for their neighbours.

And now, here it is. There's a reason we read this Gospel during this season in which we recall and celebrate Jesus' epiphany, his manifestation. Jesus has just preached about the restoration of fallen Israel, the adulterous bride, to her Lord and the first person he meets as he heads down the mountain and into town is this poor man, cut off from his people, for all intents and purposes dead. He has lost his

covenant status. He has lost his family—not just his biological family, but his covenant family. He hasn't known the temple or the Passover for who knows how many years. In the Lord's providence this man is symbolic of the whole nation of Israel. Israel hadn't heard the Lord's voice or known his presence in the temple for almost six hundred years. She was governed and oppressed by pagans. But as he has humbled himself so far as to take on human flesh, to be born of a Jewish woman, to become one of his own rebellious people, to reach out to them, just so Jesus stretches out his hand across the distance between himself and this believing leper and makes him whole. This lost son who was dead is alive again.

And Jesus doesn't leave it at that. He sends this man—in accordance with the law—to see the priest so that the priest can see that he has been healed and so that he can restore him to the covenant family. There are other times in the Gospels that Jesus bypassed the temple and the priests to make a point, but early here in his ministry he instead sends this man to the priests. It backs up the message he had just preached when he said that he had come not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them. And, too, it sent a message to the priests of Israel. Like I said, people didn't recover from leprosy. If they got better and the diagnosis was lifted by a priest, it was probably because it wasn't leprosy in the first place. I doubt this priest had ever seen a bona fide healing from leprosy. They might talk about Naaman the Syrian, but no one had ever seen a healing like that for themselves. And now this man shows up at the home of the local priest—maybe even the priest who had diagnosed him and declared him unclean—and he served as a message from Jesus: the kingdom is at hand. Israel was about to be set to rights and restored. And it was all centred in Jesus the Messiah. The people—and their priests—had a choice before them: Repent and believe in Jesus or

find yourself weeping and gnashing your teeth in the darkness when judgement comes—on the outside of the covenant family as this leper had been for so many years. Repent and believe that in Jesus the Lord was finally here to visit his people, to answer their prayer, and these lost sons and daughters would be invited into their Father's great banquet. Jesus had come to set Israel to rights.

Many of the people in the crowd watched this with joy. The Messiah really had come. That great feast Israel had been waiting for was being prepared. According to one Jewish tradition the main courses at that feast would be Behemoth, the great mythical land monster, and Leviathan, the great sea monster. Some in the crowd, having heard Jesus preach and having seen the leper healed could already smell the great beasts roasting in the oven like Thanksgiving turkeys. And then as they reach Capernaum a Roman centurion approaches Jesus. If the Lord's great banquet was being prepared, this man certainly didn't belong there!

Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army and a reminder to the Jews that they were a conquered people. Matthew doesn't tell us if this centurion was a kind man or a cruel one or how he used his authority. None of that really matters. He could have been the kindest man in the world, but he was still a local representative of Rome and a gentile. He didn't belong in that joyful messianic throng. But down the main street of the town he came. Look at Matthew 8:5-9.

When he had entered Capernaum, a centurion came up and pleaded with him, "Lord," he said, "my son is lying paralyzed at home, suffering terribly." And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." But the centurion replied, "Lord, I don't deserve to have you come under my roof! Just say the word, and my servant will be healed. I know what

authority is all about, you know—I've got soldiers answering to me, and I can say to one of them, "Go!" and he goes, and to another "Come here!" and he comes, and I can say, "Do this," to my slave, and he does it."

The centurion appeals to Jesus. Matthew's word choices stress the man's desperation. He addresses Jesus as "Lord". He'd surely heard the talk about Jesus being the Jewish Messiah—the Lord—but being a Roman he probably didn't care about that. He simply knew that Jesus could heal, that he could fix his desperate situation. He'd heard the stories. Maybe he'd even seen the leper, running into town to show himself to the priest. Exactly who or what Jesus was, that wasn't really his concern. He simply saw in Jesus a man with power and authority. A man who could, as Tolkien once put it, make the sad things of this world come untrue, and such a man, Jewish or not, Messiah or not, was worthy of respect. "Lord, my son is at home, paralysed, sick, and suffering." As Luke and John tell this story, the young boy was near death. But if Jesus could heal others, he could heal this man's son.

And Jesus said, "I will come and heal him." At this point everyone—the Centurion, the Jewish crowd following Jesus, everyone—they stopped and gasped. They shouldn't have, but I'm sure they did, because that would have been the natural response of anyone when an upright and godly Jew—a rabbi no less—went to the house of a gentile. The Mishnah declared in no uncertain terms, "The dwelling places of gentiles are unclean," and even though it came centuries later, we know the Jews of Jesus day thought no differently. Gentiles were ritually unclean, but everyone present *should* have known that this wasn't a problem for Jesus. Jesus touched the leper and instead of contracting his impurity, passed purity to the leper, restoring him to the community of the people of

God. Jesus could enter the home of a gentile and do the same thing.

So the Centurion was shocked by Jesus' offer to come to his house. He refuses with those words so often misused in celebrations of the Lord's Supper: "No. Don't come to my house. I'm not worthy that you should come under my roof." It's not that the Centurion thought he was personally unworthy, but that he knew the Jewish customs. His job was to maintain order and the last thing he wanted was a ruckus resulting from a popular rabbi entering his house. That would just stir up trouble and that was the last thing a Centurion wanted. His job was to keep the peace. And so he says to Jesus, "You don't need to come to my house. You and I are alike. We both have authority. I know how it works. I have authority over the men in my command. I send orders for this man to come and he comes. I send orders for this man to go and he goes. If you truly have the authority over sickness and demons that I think you have, then you can do the same. If you order this disease to go, it will go. If you order that demon to come, it will come. Give the orders and my little boy will be healed."

Now it was Jesus' turn to be surprised. Matthew says he marvelled. He was amazed by what he'd just heard. Look at verse 10:

When Jesus heard this, he marvelled and said to the people who following him, "I'm telling you the truth. I haven't found faith like this—not even in Israel! Let me tell you this: lots of people will come from east and west and join the great feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness, where people will weep and gnash their teeth." Then to the Centurion he said, "Go home. Let it be for you as you believed." And his son was healed at that very moment.

Notice how Jesus turns to the crowd, to his fellow Jews. Here they are, following Jesus down the mountain, ready for him to lead them into the age to come when everything is set to rights, ready to sit in his presence at that great banquet and feast on behemoth and leviathan. And the parade is stopped by this dog of a gentile who has no place in that feast. When the day comes, they're thinking, the Lord will take care of men like him. He may strut around Capernaum, in charge of the place today, but one day he would be out in the darkness, weeping and gnashing his teeth. Some probably thought—maybe even expected—Jesus to give him a little foretaste of that right now. But instead, Jesus turns and commends the man's faith to everyone. (This is why people didn't like Jesus!) He contrasts the faith of this gentile—a pagan they considered the enemy—Jesus uses it to expose the lack of faith he has seen in Israel. And he quotes from the Old Testament. Psalm 107:3 and Isaiah 43:5 (and Baruch 4:37) all speak of the Lord's promises to restore scattered Israel, bringing her lost sons and daughters from east and west. But here Jesus puts a twist on those prophecies and promises. "When Israel is restored," he's saying, "When you sit at the Lord's great feast with your fathers, with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and feast on behemoth and leviathan and celebrate your restoration and the great faithfulness of the Lord, *your brothers and sisters* from east and west will be there, and *this* man represents them. Yes, the Lord will bring Jews from east and west, but he will bring others and they, too, will have a share in the Lord's new covenant and in the age to come. And many of those who think that by birth alone they have a right to be in that banquet...well...they will find themselves out in the dark, weeping and gnashing their teeth."

Jesus knew that it wasn't yet the time for gentiles to come flooding into the kingdom, taking hold of the robes of Jews, as Zechariah had prophesied,

and saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.” But in this centurion he saw a foretaste of that day not so far off. It was a promise most of his fellow Jews had forgotten—or deliberately ignored—in favour of the promises of the great banquet, the setting things to rights, the restoration of Israel. But *this* was the reason for Israel’s existence as a people, even if few remembered it. Simeon was one of those who remembered and having met the infant Jesus at his presentation in the temple he sang those familiar words:

Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou has prepared before the face of all people; to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel.
(Luke 2:29-32)

Jesus would be the glory of Israel in that he would fulfil their mission to be a light to the nations—bringing them to the God of Israel. In that he would fulfil the law and the prophets and manifest the faithfulness of God. Again that great theme of epiphany.

Jesus commended the centurion’s faith and sent him home to his healed little boy, the firstfruits—after a fashion at any rate—of the nations who would see the faithfulness of the God of Israel manifest in Jesus, come to him in faith to give him glory, and would themselves not only be healed and set to rights, but incorporated into this covenant family as sons and daughters of God, seated at the great banquet to feast on behemoth and leviathan.

So, Brothers and Sisters, come to the Lord’s Table this morning. In the bread and wine we recall and participate in the great exodus that Jesus wrought at the cross, here we remember and are assured that we belong to him. Here we take hold of his blood-stained robe and *say*, “*Take us with you, for we have heard that God is with you.*” And here the veil is

lifted on the age to come as Jesus gives us a foretaste of the great banquet that awaits us on the day when he will, finally and once and for all, set us and all of his creation to rights. In the meantime, Friends, take the grace you have found at his Table out into the world and live it for all to see. Take the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen, with you and proclaim it to all. As sons and daughters of God, you are stewards of the gospel. Let every day be Epiphany. Make the Gospel, make the life of Jesus and the Spirit manifest in what you do and what you say so that the people around you will say, “Take us with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”

Let’s pray: O God, you know us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*