

Sermon – Sunday before Lent (St.Valentines Day)

Leviticus (13.1-2,44-46 , 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 , Mark 1:40-45.

Love in the Gut.

Our Old Testament reading is short but nails the association of sickness and being unclean in the Hebrew culture as indeed was common in many ancient cultures. This was especially so for Leprosy which covered many disfigurement complaints we now understand and know not to be contagious in normal interaction.

Last week I did a fair bit of reading watching and listening. More than normal anyway though much less than many a lockdown lounge lizard. It hasn't all been Radio 4 this week! However - via that blessed medium I was moved with the recollection of those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic. Not being able to hold, to touch and be there at the point of death, anger at the phrase "she/he had underlying health conditions" - they may as well say they were going to die anyway, dismay at the impression given that some lives are not worth living so perhaps covid has a kindness that brings an end to dementia, and physical fragility. I heard implicit moral distinction between someone succumbing because of frontline caring and someone whose lifestyle made them susceptible through obesity or some other way. Much is implied, unspoken and oblique – but it is heard and picked up by those who grieve – their ears and eyes are rightly sensitive.

Perhaps we are not far from the society of Leviticus really – we may say we want explanation, but we often really want to identify fault – fault of the victim, fault of their families, fault of the government - fault of the system. We have our own views and agendas, and judgement lurks.

Today, still in the first chapter of Mark, after many healings we have another - a leper. I said last week that what unites this breathless litany of encounters is how Jesus adapts to the needs of the other – it's about them and not him. Compassion, not judgement is the heart. My reading has been focused on Rowan William's little book on Mark who offers primarily a litany of relationships not miracles. They make no sense outside the desire of the reader to embrace a relationship with Jesus and Mark's task is to assist. Mark in words is doing what St.Paul asks the Corinthians to do in practice – be not anxious for yourself but for others, that they may be saved. It is evangelism in relationship though we often just see the miracle.

My watching this week has been for me one of the best dramas of the last decade. Some of you may have watched or heard of it. *It's a Sin* on Channel 4 makes for harrowing viewing if also funny at times. There's no fake history like *Bridgerton* or *The Crown* - entertaining though they may be - it's very real. Set in the 1980s *It's a Sin* follows a group of young London flatmates from different backgrounds and parts of the country. They are mostly gay and most will die from HIV and Aids. Like lepers from

Leviticus they were unclean and like many covid victims many were isolated at their point of death even though, unlike covid, normal contact was perfectly safe. Worse than covid they often just “disappeared” – the associated shame for families and many friends was too much it had to be hidden. The on-looking world offered more judgement than compassion. Drug addicts and gays only had themselves to blame. I heard first hand this week one Welsh university refused to offer HIV literature - because “it wasn’t in Welsh and since it only applied to drug addicts and gays it didn’t need to be translated into Welsh.” So you see why the writer chose the title *It’s a Sin* – a *Pet Shop Boy* hit song of the time it could have been uttered at the time of Leviticus without irony and still lurks in our psyche. Sin is separation from God not disfigurement of the body and Jesus’s mission is to unite us with God – the substance of who we are and Jesus does so through love not judgement.

As Jesus stretches to touch the leper there’s no judgement only compassion and desire to restore his substance. Our translation today feebly says he felt sorry for him. I’m no biblical scholar but really! He is **stirred/filled up** either with compassion or anger depending on the manuscript taken. I love the root of the Greek word used – splagma – guts - Jesus feelings are filled from the guts!! The man’s plight is gut wrenching for Jesus. His guts are filled with pity, compassion or anger – not at the man but his condition and treatment. Take your pick he doesn’t just feel sorry for him. He heals him and asks him to comply with the law for it is the law that declared him unclean.

Two questions among many arise. Why miracle and why ask to keep it secret? We will return to them again in detail as the year progresses.

Secrecy is characteristic of Mark – *this is for you, tell no one* - not only with the miracles but for other statements and declarations until Jesus’s trial before the High Priest where there are no secrets anymore only power-less authority and truth in front of earthly power. That will make up a third of this gospel more than any other.

That Jesus has extraordinary power is clear – yet he is one among many healers of his day – but it is not his substance - he is not just the best of the pack. However, we see how the crowds see him as just that when his confidences are broken. It is a misinterpretation of his substance and purpose – like seeing a vehicle but not who controls it or where they are going. Later Jesus will ask is it easier to forgive sin or perform a miracle? Any healing is for the person in need out of his relationship with them but forgiveness is for all and proves much harder even to our day.

My favourite character in *It’s a Sin* is Colin. From South Wales he goes to London to become a tailor. Shy, innocent, slightly nerdy and conservative he’s taken into the circle of fun by the others without them expecting him to change. His mother is my second favourite. Dismissed without good reason from the tailor, Colin has fits in his dull office job and ends up in Hospital. The public health act is falsely invoked - he’s confined in isolation no family, friends or visitors - he has AIDS. The poor lad has only

ever had one encounter in his life (you see how judgement lurks). He is freed by his friends and mother. She is beside his bed in her wheelchair and he says “I don’t want you to think I’m dirty” she hugs him and is unique in her compassion. Perhaps she’s my favourite, for what you forget and indeed don’t really ever see though it’s always there, is her wheelchair – she probably has MS or some similar disease but is not defined by it – she is free and gives freedom and real love to others. Colin doesn’t want to die but he does so knowing he is loved totally to his core. She finds it hard to find an undertaker willing to bury her son but easy to leave her wheelchair and embrace his very substance by showing hers.

Jesus’s authority comes not from the exercise of power, of signs and wonders but of selfless love that begins with total compassion not judgment. It will be fully shown as he is falsely judged but still filled to his guts with love. Miracles may flow but joy and peace always do from such love in the gut.

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