

## Epiphany 6 – Wesley 9am & 10.30am – 12<sup>th</sup> February 2012

Readings: 2 Kings 5:1-14 and Mark 1: 40-45

Theme: “A hands on Christ”

### Introduction

Today we have in both the Hebrew Scripture and Gospel reading healings of a leper. In one we know who it is, Naaman, in the other an unnamed leper healed by Jesus.

Naaman we are told was a mighty man of valour, a great soldier and favourite of the king. However, he was reduced to becoming a social outcaste by his leprosy. He is healed by the prophet Elisha and undergoes a faith transformation due to his healing. Likewise with the leper healed by Jesus, there is more than physical healing, there is a faith statement with the healing. Let us examine some aspects of leprosy and in particular the Marcan account set down in the Lectionary for today.

### Jesus is a ‘hands-on’ person

In ancient Israel, the lepers were the ‘lowest of low’ as far as outcastes went and that was really saying something. People feared leprosy because it was the end of life as you had known it, whether you came from a rich or poor background, privileged or not you ended up on the ‘scrap heap’ of society shunned by all except your fellow lepers. Leprosy with its power to disfigure, deform and kill made it notorious in most communities. Even today, in some parts of the world there are thousands of new cases of ‘bacillus mycobacterium leprae’ mostly found among the poorest of the poor. In Australia it has all but been eradicated. In Jesus’ day there was no treatment and any major skin ailment was seen as possible leprosy and the individual excluded from the community until they were proven free of skin lesions. Because of the fear of contagion, lepers were banned from all contact with those ‘clean’ of the disease. Lepers lived in dispirited bands on the edge of society, begging at a distance for food to be left out for them. When-ever others came near they were obliged to call out, wailing, “Unclean, unclean” to warn people of the danger. The lepers were in a sense ‘the living dead’ as they were beyond help. How horrific! In those times I would have been a leper due to a dietary skin rash that I have. For more than 25 years I took the common leprosy drug Dapsone or Avulsulphin which has changed the lives of so many people in today’s world. Hence these stories for me have particular meaning. I cannot imagine what it would be like to be thrown out of your job, your family grouping, no contact with friends and to have to scavenge on the outskirts of your community to survive.

It is into this world that Jesus chose to enter. One leper, made bold by the compassion he had witnessed from afar, dared to come up to Jesus, kneel and beg for help. Jesus did not step back in disgust but did an amazing thing – “Jesus stretched out his hands and touched him”. Touched the unclean, the contagious, the untouchable. Can we imagine not being able to touch, to shake hands, to exchange greetings that sometimes have hugs and kisses – no physical contact at all!

Yet here Jesus restores hope, healing and wholeness to this individual. He confirms total restoration by sending the ex-leper off to fulfil the social and religious obligations of the day saying: “Go and show yourself to a priest, make the offerings

commanded by Moses, that the people may witness the proof of your healing”.

### Who are the outcasts of our society?

Who are the ‘modern day lepers’? Those that Australian society either rejects or has great difficulty accepting? May be it is not that they lack physical touch but mainline society struggles to accept them.

A difficult question. Is it – drug abusers

- those with mental health issues
- those who sleep rough
- asylum seekers fleeing persecution
- AIDS sufferers
- some indigenous groups
- those with a variety of addictions

You no doubt will think of others as well and I encourage you to do that. Some of these are the untouchables of our society.

John Wesley laid down the following rule for those who joined his Methodist Society: “Go not to those who need you, but to

those who need you most.”

The leper who came to Jesus understood one thing very well. There would be no healing unless Jesus wanted to heal the leper. If we don’t want to touch other lives, if we don’t want to be healing agents of Jesus among the untouchables of society, or for the ‘hard-to-love folk’ in our family, church or community then nothing good is ever going to happen for those who need us most. What an uncomfortable challenge this passage is for us today!!

See the scene once more: place yourself in it as the leper kneeling at the feet of Jesus. What would that have felt like putting your future totally into the hands of a perceived compassionate stranger? The leper says:

“Jesus of Nazareth, if you really want to, you can make me clean.” Jesus reaches out his hand to the untouchable and touches him saying: “I really want to. Be clean.”

Jesus calls us to be ‘hands on’ Christians which may well cause some discomfort and disruption both personally, spiritually and within our faith community. A disturbing passage! Be disturbed by it! Amen.