

The kingdom of God is among you

A sermon on Luke 17:11-21 by the Revd Belinda Groves, 9 October 2022

Sometimes, as you read Luke's gospel, Jesus sounds like the kind of project manager you want on the job; the one who's clearly focused on getting something done – in time and on schedule. Like back in Luke 14 where Jesus outlines the cost of discipleship. *"For which of you," he says, "Intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him..."*

At other times however – you can't help feeling a little bit of sympathy for the Pharisees. If we read a bit further from today's Luke reading, to verses 20 and 21, Jesus is much more abstract. *"The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed..."* That's not so helpful, is it? *"Nor will [people be able to] say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."* Among you? What does he mean by that? And none of that directly answers their question to him asking when the kingdom of God will arrive?

Throughout this chapter, Jesus is challenging the way we look at the world; the way we measure progress or recognise success or assess potential. After all, it was just last week that Jesus said that faith might be as small as a mustard seed or as ordinary as serving up dinner. And here, we have the story of the ten lepers, a story that continues to challenge our understanding of faith – revealing that God is active, that the kingdom of God is found, in the most unlikely places and situations and people.

Because it would be pretty hard to find a less likely place for the activity of God than where Jesus and his disciples are, *"going through the region between Samaria and Galilee"*. Now, if you were a good Jew, Galilee was bad enough. You might remember the crowds in John's gospel saying, *"Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee?"* But Samaria was worse. Samaritans, in Judean eyes, were ethnically compromised – the descendants of the northern tribes of Israel and other Mesopotamian peoples transported to the region by the conquering Assyrian empire – and their religious traditions, though not vastly different, were equally suspect.

And it is on the border, *'the region between Samaria and Galilee'*, where this tension was rife. In 128 BCE Judeans had attacked the Samaritan sanctuary on Mt Gerizim and in Jesus' day, hostilities were still strong enough that Galileans travelling to Jerusalem often bypassed Samaria altogether, though this added considerable time to their journey. Go back to Luke 9, to the start of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, and you find a Samaritan village which refuses to receive him because of where he's headed, and James and John ask if divine power could firebomb the village then and there.

But the writer of Luke is telling us to take another look at this place. To recognise that this is a place where God is active.

We're also being told to take another look at this situation. As Jesus entered the village, verse 12, ten lepers approached him. They may not have had Hansen's disease, as we know leprosy today, but would have suffered from a range of skin diseases assumed to be contagious. This meant they were isolated from their community and forced to fend for themselves, and as outcasts and beggars and scavengers, they were not highly regarded.

But these lepers know the rules. They keep their distance, and they call out to Jesus for mercy. And Jesus responds. Interestingly, Jesus also obeys the rules. He doesn't come near them or touch them, but he says, *"Go and show yourselves to the priests,"* (the ones who can declare them clean and healed) and the lepers go, and as they go, they are healed.

The kingdom at God is clearly present in this situation. Ten lepers are healed! But something in the narrative tells us that this is more than a healing account; that what happens after the healing is possibly even more significant.

Because, in verse 15, *“Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him... And he,”* the text says, *“He was a Samaritan.”* And just in case we missed it, Jesus mentions it again. *“Were not ten made clean? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?”*



And to rub the salt in, as commentator William Loader says, *“Luke has Jesus announce that this tenth leper, [this Samaritan, this foreigner] has been made whole, an image of full salvation.”* *“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”* It is a Samaritan who demonstrates true faith, who turns back, who gives God the glory, who gives thanks. It is a Samaritan – an unlikely person – in an unlikely situation – in an unlikely place – who recognises where God is active, who realises the kingdom of God in their midst.

The story is deliberately subversive. A despised Samaritan, a despairing leper, *“becomes,”* in Loader’s words, *“our high priest, as it were, our model of salvation. And those who belong get it wrong. A simple but disturbing story that lives itself out in every generation”*

How does this story live itself out in our generation? In our experience? Perhaps that is something we could talk about after the service – in the breakout groups?

I am thinking about a woman who came to live near our church and started to help out with our playgroups and a cooking programme we run, but – she would say to me – “I am not religious, I’m just like to help out.” She was a recovering alcoholic and suffered terribly at times, when her medication became ineffective, from depression, and recently, when she was hospitalised, I went to visit her, and she introduced me to one of the nurses, “This is Belinda. She’s a minister. I help out at her church, but I’m not a person of faith.” “Isn’t that what faith is?” the nurse said, “Doing, not just believing. Aren’t you on the way?” And I realised that my friend was a model of salvation – she was someone turning back like the Samaritan to genuinely live out a faith she still couldn’t articulate that she was connected to.

I am sure you can think of other, better examples. It’s a good exercise to think about how others – perhaps how each one of us – are models of salvation for each other in some way.

As I was thinking about this this week, I was reminded of an old episode of *Grand Designs Abroad*. Do any of you remember that spin-off? It followed the adventures of English couples who’d decided that building impossible builds with crazy deadlines and crazy budgets in a place they spoke the language was too easy – so they’d do it overseas! Anyway, this episode featured a

couple who'd bought a ruin of a 1,000-year-old hill-top castle in Tuscany, which had been bombed by the Germans and almost totally destroyed by subsequent earthquakes, but which they – despite the best efforts of Italian bureaucracy – managed to restore.

But what struck me most was the insanely passionate determination of the husband, who excavated metres and metres of stones by hand, to put back stones where they originally stood; the keystones and springers in the archways, the stone lintels, the loggia edgings. And how, as he was doing this, the residents of the village, initially unhappy about English people buying their castle, began to delight in the restoration and began to return stones they or their parents or grandparents had 'liberated' over the decades.

This slightly mad Englishman (a prerequisite for appearing on *Grand Designs*) was able to look at that pile of rubble and see the value of each stone; to see what would take shape in their midst. And we, too, are challenged to look at the unlikely places and situations and people and see the kingdom of God taking shape amongst us.

And to think about our own response to Jesus. Just like those villagers who, seeing the work going on at the castle, suddenly remembered the wall dad had built along the back of the yard or the large pavers in the courtyard that belonged to the building, we are challenged to bring our own stones, our own lives, to where God is active, to share in building the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God as well is made up of stones from unlikely places and situations and people...and it is made up of each one of us.