

BEING MADE WHOLE

Leviticus 21:16-24

Acts 3:1-10

When I was a small child, my family attended Cults Parish Church in Fife, near the village of Pitlessie. This is an old building, dating from pre-reformation times, and it has many features to interest either a church historian, a student of architecture or a small child. I loved looking at the bright stained-glass window, with a picture of the Good Shepherd carrying a lamb across a burn: that's still the picture that comes to my mind when I hear the phrase "The Good Shepherd". I loved the memorial plaques of the wall to Sir David Wilkie, the artist and his parents. I loved the feel of the rough matting on the floor, and I was endlessly intrigued by the leper's window, by one of the two doors. We used that window when the Sunday School was to return into the service at the end, to be present at a baptism. It was a useful way for Miss Scott to peep through and see if they were ready for us yet. We fancied that this way we were all undetected, but actually the shuffling and whispering and heavy breathing of a dozen or more youngsters must have proclaimed itself to all but the deafest of the worshippers.

Looking at the ruins of the old church in Stow it is hard to see if there was a leper's squint there, but chances are there was, or something like it. These little windows, set near the door, were places where those who were deemed unfit to come into the general gathering could stand and watch and listen to the service, and at the appropriate time, could receive the communion elements. Not all who used the lepers squint were literally lepers, but there was always some reason why they could not be in the congregation, not take a full part in the worship.

In that sense, the man who sat at the beautiful gate was like a leper. He didn't have leprosy, but he was a cripple. Listen to what the Jewish Law had to say about Levites who were crippled:

Read Leviticus 21:16-24

In the Law lame lambs, or goats or bulls could not be used for sacrifice: only what was whole and perfect could be offered to God. In the same way this was extended to who could serve as officials in the worship of God: they had to be Levites, of course, but also they had to be whole, healthy specimens.

Now we don't know if this man was a Levite or not - though his sitting near the temple could be a faint indication in that direction. But we can be sure that as a cripple he was certainly despised. He was seen to be less than whole, not a real person at all.

And before you get too outraged at this barbaric, ignorant attitude, just think to yourself about how you react to the people who sit on our streets, in Galashiels or in Edinburgh, who beg. When did you last give to one of them, and if you have, did you speak to them? Have you ever entered into conversation with them? Have you treated them as full members of the human race?

How would you feel if a lame beggar decided to take up a position on the steps of this church, so that every time you came to worship you had to walk past him, to avoid stepping on him, to be made to feel uncomfortable by his naked need? Would it be a situation we would welcome? No, I don't think so. I worked for three or four years as

Church Officer at Broughton St. Mary's church in Edinburgh. The Georgian church building has an imposing Grecian front, complete with large pillars supporting a solid stone roof, and forming a sort of portico in front of the doors. There was a homeless man who decided to live for a while in the church portico. I would like to think he wanted to be nearer to God, but really it was somewhere that had a roof and at least one wall. Every day, for a few weeks, he would be there when I came to get on with my duties, he would be there, and his sleeping bag, his cardboard box mattress, and his carton of milk. Every day I would let him come in to the church to use the toilets and the wash-hand basin. He didn't do any harm, but there were some in the congregation who were definitely not happy to walk past their church and see him sleeping there, and their demands to find him a better place to stay had, I'm afraid, less to do with Christian charity than with the desire to clear him away, like rubbish.

And again, before you shake your head, would you not think the same thing about anyone camped on our steps: get him help, of course, but get him out of our hair?

So how do you think the Jewish worshippers felt about this crippled man, who cluttered up the door of their temple? And how do you think he felt about himself? Well, we know that. When Peter says "Look at us," it shows that he habitually did not look at the people from whom he begged. He was ashamed of his condition, ashamed of himself. And when Peter told him to look, he did - because he hoped that by obedience he would gain some money. He knew that he had no rights, no dignity, and so he had no proper pride.

He had taken his position beside the temple: perhaps just because he knew lots of people would pass that way - sheer opportunism: and there are those who treat the church in much the same way, as though, it simply exists to supply their own personal needs; perhaps he was in this place because he wanted them to think about the difficult side of life as they went to worship - there are those whose difficulties have given a twisted take on life, and they want to rub their suffering in people's faces. It could be that he took his position there as at a leper's squint - so that he could at least get as near to worship as he was allowed.

Whatever the reason, one thing was certain, he was close to the worship. By the beautiful gate he would be able to hear the words of prayers and psalms; he would be able to smell the incense and the savours of roasting meats of sacrifice; he could feel himself near to the holy presence of God.

The temple gates are mainly silver and gold plated, but Peter says that he has no silver and gold: here is all this riches of the temple building, and none of it can help the crippled man. There's a real lesson for us there. If we had a similar problem on our steps, I think that we would use money, to help him, to get him elsewhere. We would use money, and we might be able to give a lot of help with it, but in the end the man would still be crippled, be and feel less than whole. Where the church, where Christians have money, we are far too apt to rely on what it can do to help others. And with it we can give real help, but it is when we give beyond our resources that we allow God to get involved.

Peter and John give no money, not because they are keeping it all for themselves; not because they have spent it all selfishly on themselves, but because the believers had everything in common, and so they had nothing of their own in their pockets or bags. But that isn't going to worry them, because having nothing, they know that they possess

everything, and having nothing they can share freely what they have. “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise and walk!” And it is not just the illness which is healed, this was done in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and just as with Jesus’ own miracles (think of lepers sent to the priest, think of the little girl raised to life and restored to her parents) wholeness is restored. He is now a full and complete human being, and he can go into the temple and praise God.

Everyone is seized with wonder. They had hoped that the cripple would just go away, perhaps, but no one thought of his cripple-hood going away. Too often we can’t see God’s solutions to our problems, or the problems of others. And so as the crowd flocks to gaze in wonder, Peter, with the healed man still clinging to him in joy, uses the occasion to ask the crowd to consider Jesus (whom he has just emulated) and to repent so that they too may be made whole.

For there are too many people who feel less than human, too many who feel that they need to keep on the periphery of things. There are too many who sit on the steps of the sanctuary but dare not allow following Jesus to be the defining thing in their life. Too many and maybe you are one of them. There are too many who are afraid - afraid that they will be rejected - by other people or by God; too many who are afraid that God will not live up to what he has promised, so that they dare not look up and put their whole faith and trust in him. And to all these many Peter speaks, and the church speaks, and Jesus himself speaks when he tells us that all of us are welcome, none need stay outside, peering through the leper’s squint and not really belonging. To all of us comes the message that we need not find ways to live with our brokenness, our imperfections: that we can be made whole. To all of us come the message to look up and believe. To all of us comes the promise that when we trust God and give to others beyond what we have, he will work in wonderful ways.

What we need to do is to come away from the leper’s squint, peering in at the faith, at the church, at the joy of whole-hearted believing and living, and join in ourselves.