



SUNDAY 11 FEBRUARY 2024

DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

The Parishes of: Bishop Auckland || Newton Aycliffe & Shildon || Willington
Crook, Tow Law & Wolsingham || Tudhoe || Coundon, Ferryhill & Windlestone

ESCOMB PARTNERSHIP NOTE

6th Sunday of the Year (B): Mark 1: 40-45

Jack was desperate. His wife was ill and there was no sign that she would get any better. Struggling reluctantly with having to face questions of mortality, he longed for anyone who could reverse her illness or keep death at bay. Maybe we've all been there.

Cancers, dementia and a complex range of mental illness may be the more common features of the landscape of our time. In Jesus' time with us on earth, our Gospels record incidences of blindness, deafness, physical handicap and a range of conditions attributed to unwholesome spirits. Leprosy stories also suggest this affliction was not an unfamiliar sight.

Like all illnesses there were side effects. Fear of contagion mean that lepers were banned from towns and villages, separated from their families and barred from the temple, synagogues and religious gatherings. In short, you were cut off from mainstream life. Your only companions were other leprosy sufferers.

In today's Gospel story Jesus heals a leper who has faith in the Lord's ability to cure him. Not only is the man restored to health, he's been given his life back. Returning to his family and reconnecting with the world again is at the heart of what's happening here. It's a joy, but far from straightforward. Human hesitancy and suspicion often surround radical change and acceptance can't be an automatic and reliable outcome. The public can be hard to convince and the newly healed man must tread carefully.

But he doesn't. The joy takes over. Jesus doesn't ask him but 'sternly orders' him, after making a ritual thanksgiving offering, to keep quiet about his healing. It seems a strange requirement. After all, the man's new health is a public fact and renewed connections with family and community can't be hidden. The reason behind the Lord's instruction is to create some protection for himself. Now Jesus himself can't go openly into towns but has to stay on the outskirts where nobody lived. In effect he changes places with the leper. The consequences of his compassion for the man have given him problems he could do without, hence the warning.

Jesus surely would know the likelihood of what would happen. He still went ahead with healing the man. In the climate of the time, if you were rejected and despised by people, the tendency was to believe you were similarly rejected and despised by God too. Jesus came to show a God of love and compassion, to reverse punitive notions of a hard-faced God. He surrendered his own freedom of movement for this man and experienced something of the restrictions the man knew first hand.

This is a detail of our God's brilliant choosing to share our humanity, to live with us at street level, being part of his own creation and inviting us to share in his own divine life. Smaller sacrifices, done out of love, will cumulate in Jesus death and resurrection. The sacrifices we make to enable and affirm others have a value beyond measure. Jack would say it doesn't feel like it. The Lord would want him to know it's priceless.



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Pope Francis' hopes prior to the last COP28 Conference

If we are confident in the capacity of human beings to transcend their petty interests and to think in bigger terms, we can keep hoping that COP38 will allow for a decisive acceleration of energy transition, with effective commitments subject to ongoing monitoring. This conference can represent a change of direction, showing that everything done since 1992 was in fact serious and worth the effort, or else it will be a great disappointment and jeopardise whatever good has been achieved thus far.

Despite the many negotiations and agreements, global emissions continue to increase. Certainly, it could be said that, without those agreements, they would have increased even more. Still, in other themes related to the environment, when there was a will, very significant results were obtained, as was the case with the protection of the ozone layer. Yet, the necessary transition towards clean energy sources such as wind and solar energy, and the abandonment of fossil fuels, is not progressing at the necessary speed. Consequently, whatever is being done risks being seen only as a ploy to distract attention.

We must move beyond the mentality of appearing to be concerned but not having the courage needed to produce substantial changes. We know that at this pace in just a few years we will surpass the maximum recommended limit of 1.5 degrees C and shortly thereafter even reach 3 degrees C, with a high risk of arriving at a critical point. Even if we do not reach this point of no return, it is certain that the consequences would be disastrous and precipitous measures would have to be taken, at enormous cost and with grave and intolerable economic and social effects. Although the measures that we can take now are costly, the cost will be all the more burdensome the longer we wait.

- Laudate Deum paras 54-56