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10th October: Proper 23

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The Tenth Leper

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This is the story of two men travelling in opposite directions.

One of them is on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem; from the religious hinterlands of the north — Matthew's 'Galilee of the Gentiles' — to the city of the great King, the focus of all that is holy in Israel, and therefore the centre of the known world. Luke tells us that Jesus has 'set his face to go to Jerusalem,' where he will enter the Temple courts and declare the gospel with which he has been entrusted (Luke 9:51, 20:1). Whether in terms of geography, of religion and spirituality, or his own life and mission, Jesus is on his way from the margins and periphery to the centre and focus of all that is of God.

The other man finds himself propelled quite the other way. To begin with, he is a Samaritan. Jews of Jesus' day, as John reminds us, did not normally associate with Samaritans (John 4:9). More than a century earlier, a Jewish leader named John Hyrcanus had destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. While Jesus was still a boy, militant Samaritans had reciprocated by scattering human bones in the courtyard of the Jerusalem temple, intending to render its sacred precincts ritually unclean. Tensions between the two groups remained high. Luke himself tells us how, when a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem, the disciples wanted to call down 'fire from heaven' on their heads (Luke 9:54). More efficient than napalm by far, the disciples have lightning bolts in mind. Even Jesus, who is normally gracious to outsiders and the excluded, calls the man a 'foreigner.'

Were all this not enough, he is also a leper. Whatever medical diagnosis may be assigned to the biblical disease, it was often seen as God's punishment for sin. The book of Leviticus dedicates two long chapters to matters of profanation and pollution associated with this particular affliction. Lepers were quarantined, shunned, subjected to perpetual exile. Expelled from the society of the righteous and faithful, they were condemned to a life of begging and near-starvation on the fringes of society.

Which is where Jesus meets the man and his nine companions, lepers all. Whereas he is on his way from the periphery to the centre of Israel's life, they eke out a marginal existence on the outskirts of an unnamed village somewhere on the border between Galilee and Samaria. It seems strangely fitting that modern scholars are unable to decide what to make of Luke's geography here. Whether they or the evangelist have a more accurate knowledge of political boundaries in ancient Palestine, the encounter takes place at a time and place that now elude us. Their limbo illustrates perfectly the displacement they endure; yet as far as their contemporaries are concerned, the lepers are exactly where they belong.

And they themselves know their place: not daring to approach the passing group, they keep their distance and shout from afar: 'Jesus, Master, have mercy upon us.' Excluded from normal social contact, they have nonetheless discovered his name. Perhaps only as a rumour, a snatch of gossip overheard in the course of begging their daily bread, word has reached their disfigured ears that this Galilean rabbi wields holy power sufficient to heal and restore them. 'Jesus, Master,' they cry out, 'Have mercy upon us.'

Jesus' answer is economical in the extreme: 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' No words of gentle probing; no compassionate inquiry or assurance of pardon. No physical contact between clean and unclean. In fact, no indication whatsoever that Jesus does anything more than shout back across the divide. All they hear is one more demand for them to move on. Yet if the content is familiar from a thousand previous commands, its purpose and direction are essentially distinct. For in this case, Jesus invites them to turn around; no longer driven out by decrees of expulsion and banishment, they are free to join in the direction of his own journey from the margins to the centre of all things. If they are to show themselves 'to the priests,' as the covenant requires of those made newly whole, they can do so only at the Jerusalem Temple, in the holy city to which Jesus himself has turned.

Unlike those who in their inability to heal have constrained the lepers' every move, he both offers them what they ask for and honours their independence. They are not required to bow down or beg from him, or prove themselves worthy of the gift he intends to give. He corrects neither their language nor their theology, even though calling him 'Teacher' or 'Master' falls far short of his true identity. 'Go and show yourselves to the priests' is all that Jesus asks.

At this point, however, events take an unexpected turn. There are ten lepers, but only nine are Jewish. Only nine could be expected to head toward Jerusalem, which is exactly what they do without discussion or delay. As far as we can tell, Samaritans still worshipped on Mount Gerizim in Jesus' day. So that is where the tenth leper would have gone in search of a priest to verify his healing. Neither in this gospel nor elsewhere in the New Testament is there so much as a hint that Jesus accepted the validity of Samaritan theology, Samaritan worship, or the Samaritan priesthood. On the contrary, he calls this man an outsider, a 'foreigner' and stranger, much as he tells the woman at the well (also Samaritan) that she and her people are ignorant at best when it comes to worship (John 4:22). In Jesus' eyes, there is only one true way to the one true God.

Even so, he leaves the tenth leper free to pursue the wrong path. In his case, 'Go and show yourself to the priests' can only mean a journey away from

Jerusalem, continuing in a direction that takes him further from the truth.

All ten are accustomed to being ordered about. All ten obey. All ten are healed on the way. But only the tenth leper turns back. The other nine, presumably, need only have waited for Jesus and his companions to catch up with them, for they are all headed south. But it is the half-caste foreigner, the heretic and perpetual outsider, who sees most clearly which way he must go.

It seems unlikely that the other nine were any less ecstatic, or their healing any less complete. Doubtless they too fully embraced the unexpected turn their lives had now taken. The difference with the tenth leper lay in his ability to see beyond himself; beyond the gift that restored him to the one who had given it. His second effort elicits a second response. If Jesus' initial address had invited all ten to step forward in hope of healing, his second is directed only to the one who returned with thanks. Once more Jesus tells the man to move on, but this time as a homecoming from exile: 'Get up and go your way; your faith has made you well.' The language is theologically pregnant: his faith has not just healed, it has saved him.

Saint Paul insists that Christ's death and resurrection are for the benefit of all, both those already on their way to Jerusalem and those who worship elsewhere, no matter how far away. Jesus himself declares 'that repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem' (Luke 24:47). 'All nations' without exception, beginning from the city where he ends his life journey, then takes it up again.

Jesus continues toward Jerusalem, just as the tenth leper goes his own way. Once more they are headed in opposite directions. But by returning to Jesus — however briefly — the one leper has exchanged a gracious answer for the gift of life itself. Just so, Jesus offers to reorient us, even before we ask. It is a gift given freely, but only in turning back do we see Him face to face. Only then does the invitation become an assurance and the prospect of healing become a gift of new life. More than simple gratitude, this is a journey from hope to wholeness; from exclusion to intimacy; from rumours that reach scarred ears to the gracious words we ourselves long to hear: 'Go in peace; your faith has saved and made you well.'