

“Honouring The Way”

(Luke 17.11-19)

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The Healing of Ten Lepers

Today’s gospel tells of the healing of ten lepers. At that time, skin disease was seen as an uncleanness that could infect a community not only physically, but also morally and spiritually, and so sufferers were isolated from normal society. They could only be restored to community if a local priest gave them a certificate saying they were now ‘clean’. This is why Jesus sends them off to show themselves to the priests. (14a)

It’s a gospel that begs for a sermon on the priority of gratitude... only *one* of the ten returns in thankfulness. Or perhaps it should be a sermon about how surprising it is *which* people respond to grace... “*And he was a Samaritan!*” (16b) But my attention is drawn to something else... Jesus sends them off to the priests and the text says, “*And while they were still on their way, they became clean.*” (14b).¹

“*While they were on their way...*” The Greek is precise and demands this translation. The lepers’ transformation happens *as* they are running... while they’re on the journey. There is something so convincing in Jesus, that they rush off to get their certification of wholeness *before* anything has happened. The miracle happens... while they’re on their way.

Story

There’s a wonderful Hasidic² story that goes something like this...

Once there was an old peasant named Isaac. Isaac was very poor and lived a life of great hardship. But one night, a dream came to him... He saw a big city (that he recognised as Krakow)... a bridge... and just beyond... a fine building... and in the building... a room

¹ Most of the scripture quotations follow Nathan Nettleton’s paraphrase www.laughingbird.net

² The Hasidic movement originated in the Jewish community of Poland in the early 18th century. They were great story tellers.

containing a great treasure... a treasure that was waiting for *him*! Naturally he dismissed it as a silly dream... but it came again and again... every night for months. So one day... he gathered his last morsels of food, put on his tattered cloak and walked out of his cottage... to journey to Krakow to find the treasure. He knew he was mad... but he had to try. It was as if the treasure was calling him.

It was a terrible journey – long and hard – and he was starving and exhausted when he finally entered the city. He wandered aimlessly for a day or two... but *then* he saw it... the bridge of his dream... and beyond it... the building... just as it had appeared to him. Heart thumping, he ran to the bridge... but as he got closer... he saw that it was heavily guarded. And then he knew – the fine building of his dream was the royal palace... and there was no way for a peasant like him to enter. Isaac threw himself down on the pavement and wept... hoping to die.

His weeping attracted the attention of one of the guards, who came over and challenged him. *“Old man, what are you doing here and why do you weep?”* Isaac told the guard of his dream and his journey. The soldier roared with laughter. *“You old fool. Fancy coming all that way on the whim of a dream. Why I’ve had a dream too... of a fabulous treasure... sitting behind the fireplace of an old peasant called Isaac... but it’s a dream... you don’t think I’m going to go looking for it do you. Get out of here!”*

Isaac’s journey home was even more terrible... and he arrived back at his cottage more dead than alive. But with feeble hands, he dug away the crumbling mortar of his fireplace... and there it was... nestled in a hole in the wall... a fabulous, fabulous treasure.

The point is simple... The real treasure, that ‘good life’ we yearn for... is right in front of us... right here in the midst of our ordinary imperfect life... yet we don’t know it’s here. Right in front of our noses all the time...

But it’s also true... that we often have to go on a long and difficult journey to discover it.

The Wisdom of the Story

The good life we yearn for... happiness... fulfilment... freedom... is *not* somewhere else. It's here... right in front of us. We overlook the gift of God that is right before us... the divine abundance that calls to us saying, '*Take me... gather me up.*'

Meanwhile, contemporary culture in its desperate dissatisfaction, fuelled by the consumerist imperative to sell us something we don't already have, always tells us that happiness is *somewhere else*... It's waiting for us in that other place... whether it be the perfect house, or the perfect holiday or the perfect family... whatever... Always just out of reach.

But the consistent teaching of Christ Jesus is, that the Kingdom of God is in our hands... here and now. Which is what this Hasidic story is telling us...

But... Isaac only discovers the treasure, he only realises it's behind his fireplace, by going on that terrible journey. The journey looks like folly... and indeed it is because he's chasing a dream... but without the journey, the treasure would always have remained hidden. That's the paradox that makes this, such a rich and insightful tale.

Honour the Journey

If we are wise, we'll honour the journey of our life... All of it – the mistakes, the messes, the dead-ends, the disasters – all of it.

I look back over my six decades and like the story, it *has* often been a *hard* journey. All that striving, often after illusory or fruitless things. I'm tempted to judge it (and myself) harshly – *you fool!* And yet... and yet... it is *this* journey that has brought me to the insight and 'wisdom' of now. Yes, *now* I understand that the treasure I've desired is already here... nowhere else... but it's the journey that taught me that.

Conclusion

For the lepers of today's gospel, *their* healing happens to them '*on their way*'... it is the journey that releases the miracle of Christ. It's significant that the first name accorded to the young church was... *The Way*. (Acts 9.2)

Honour the Way... even if it's full of confusion and stumbling. Honour the Way! Let's get up from our comfortable pews of lukewarm commitment and get on the Way. The treasure is calling!