

Mark 1:40-45

⁴⁰ A leper came to him (and kneeling down) begged him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean." ⁴¹ Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." ⁴² The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. ⁴³ Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. ⁴⁴ Then he said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." ⁴⁵ The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

Context

For several weeks we have been following the beginning chapter of the Gospel of Mark as Jesus proclaims repentance and the Kingdom of God in Galilee. Some of the highlights to this point are:

- Jesus has called his first disciples
- He has demonstrated authority and power of illness and demons in healing Simon's mother-in-law, all the sick who came to Capernaum, and the casting out of demons from people.

The ending of last week's gospel was: ³⁵ Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed. ³⁶ Simon and those who were with him pursued him ³⁷ and on finding him said, "Everyone is looking for you." ³⁸ He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come." ³⁹ So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee. (Mk 1:35-39)

Today's gospel, all of six verses, captures Jesus' encounter with a leper. This marks a final healing on the journey throughout Galilee. At the beginning of Chapter 2, Jesus and his disciples return to Capernaum.

Donald Juel, (*Mark*, 43) connects our text with what follows. He puts Mark 1:40-3:6 together and titles the section "Transgressor of the Boundaries." He writes: "Jesus' healing of the leper is the first of several stories that deal with Jesus' violation of ritual boundaries."

Commentary

The final account in Mark's first chapter adds a twist to Jesus' encounters. Up to this point, all who came to Jesus were free to do so. The only operative constraints seem to have been keeping the Sabbath. The people of Capernaum seemed to wait until sundown marking the end of Sabbath before they approached the door of Simon's house. But in this encounter, there are a whole range of religious rules, norms and health concerns that would keep the leper from openly approaching Jesus.

If Jesus' prior "boundary crossing" might have raised concerns of the religious authorities, e.g., in the healing of Simon's mother-in-law, Jesus touches a woman not his relative and touches a sick woman. In this encounter he will touch a leper. After the cure, Jesus instructs the man: "See that you tell no one anything..." Instead, the cured man tells everyone! As a result, Jesus' mission is thwarted as soon as it begins: "It was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly" (v. 45).

Leprosy and the Man

The identification of the man who came to Jesus as "a leper" is not as precise as at first glance it may seem. Medical researchers who have examined the biblical data in Lev. 13-14 feel certain that the biblical term "leprosy" is a collective noun designating a wide variety of chronic skin diseases, not necessarily Hansen's disease. Regardless, anyone who was identified as a leper – from Hansen's

disease to a simple skin rash – was reduced to a lowest state of existence. In addition to the physical ravages of the disease, his cultic impurity was graphically described in the Levitical provision: “*The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, ‘Unclean, unclean’. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation without the camp*” (Lev. 13:45 ff). Rabbinic refinement of the biblical legislation imposed many practical difficulties upon the leper, for even a chance encounter between the leper and the non-leper could render the latter unclean. Lepers were allowed to live unhampered wherever they chose, except in Jerusalem and cities which had been walled from antiquity. They could even attend the synagogue services if a screen was provided to isolate them from the rest of the congregation. In spite of these two provisions, however, leprosy brought deep physical and mental anguish for both the afflicted individual and the community in which or near which he lived. It is against this background that the significance of the cleansing of a leper by Jesus can be appreciated, whether the man in Mark’s account had true leprosy or some other skin disease [William Lane, *Gospel of Mark*, 85-86].

The leper, who had either seen Jesus’ works or had heard about them, came pleading asking Jesus to remove from him the ravages and stigma of his designation as leper. The request is slightly other than straight forward. Rather than the simple “Make me clean,” we hear “*If you wish you can make me clean.*” It raises the question, given the man seems to know about Jesus as a miracle worker, why would Jesus not “wish” to make the man clean?

Commentaries offer a variety of options and opinions. It is perhaps a simple plea from someone who has experienced life without power and hope and knows too well that his every request is subject to the other’s whim/wish/decision. It may simply be the language of one experienced in begging. What is not evident is how the leper perceives Jesus: itinerant miracle-worker or one through whom the power of God was directed.

The majority of translations opt for “*make me clean,*” but there are cases of “*declare me clean*” – possibly indicating that the leper is approaching Jesus as though he were a priest with the authority to return the man to the realm of active society. If one assumes that the priority in the leper’s mind is return to the mainstream of life, the “declare” makes sense.

Either way, the man has crossed the understood boundaries separating clean and unclean and made his request of Jesus.

Jesus’ Reaction

Where the lepers request is open to some interpretation, at least the manuscripts have the same word: *katharizō*. Not so in the text of v.41, Jesus’ response. Depending on the manuscript used, a translator will find either *splagchnistheis* or *orgistheis*. The former word is normally translated as “filled with compassion” or “moved with pity” and appears in other miracle accounts (Mark 6:34; 9:22). The latter word is rendered “moved with indignation” or “moved with anger” and is also used in Mark 9:19, 23. Very different reactions/emotional response which will set the tone of the passage.

The encounter between Jesus and the leper contains several verbs that describe Jesus’ emotional state. How they are translated plays an important role in the tone of the passage. The textual tradition indicates that uncertainty over the emotional tone of the passage also existed in antiquity. Most manuscripts describe Jesus’ initial reaction to the leper’s appeal (v. 41), rendered “filled with compassion” or “moved with pity” (*splagchnistheis*), the verb used in other miracle accounts (Mark 6:34; 9:22). If that weren’t enough, the subject of the phrase is not quiet clear. It could be Jesus or it could be the leper.

There is a minority text that chooses to translate Jesus' reaction as, "moved with indignation (or anger)," because a different verb appears there: *orgistheis* (also used in Mark 9:19, 23) – but in these minority texts the subject of the phrase is not clear. There are two choices: Jesus or the leper.

Arguing for the leper as subject, the thought is that he has become so overwhelmed with his virtually hopeless plight that in blind rage he touched Jesus – something that is grammatically possible. The admonition in v. 43 (⁴³ *Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once*) would then have specific reference to this act coming after the leper had been made whole and was in a frame of mind to receive such a rebuke. The problem is the minor attestation in manuscripts, the strain for an explanation, and it is inconsistent with Jesus' reaction elsewhere. It would stand as an example apart.

However, assuming that Jesus is the subject, the anger can be understood as an expression of righteous indignation at the ravages of sin, disease and death which take their toll even upon the living, a toll particularly evident in a leper. As such, Jesus' encounter with the leper brings him once more into the sphere of the demonic.

Clearly, the translators of the New American Bible opted for the majority text and *splagchnistheis*, but considering the other possibility (and the subject) opens up a wider range of human responses emanating from the encounter.

Jesus' Actions

His actions consisted of a gesture and a pronouncement. The touch of Jesus was significant from two points of view. From the perspective of the leper, it was an unheard-of act of compassion which must have moved him deeply and strengthened him in his conviction he had not asked for help in vain. From the perspective of Jesus' relationship to the cultic and ritual system, it indicated that he did not hesitate to act in violation of its regulations when the situation demanded. Jesus' touch and his sovereign pronouncement mean the same thing: "*I do will it. Be made clean.*" This was not a priestly pronouncement, as is made clear in verses 43–44, but a declaration that healing would follow immediately and completely. The text describes an instantaneous radical healing which was visible to all who met the man.

Verse 43 represents another challenge to the interpreter. The expression "warning sternly" can also be interpreted as "snorting" or an expression of "rage." There are milder interpretations, but "scold" is about as mild as it comes. The language is just very strong and seems out of place. And again, one wonders about the tone of the passage. The most plausible explanation, and the one most often offered in commentaries, is that Jesus foresaw the disobedience of the man. "*See that you tell no one.*" (v.44) will fall on deaf ears. While we think of as spreading the Good News, the result is that it became impossible "*for Jesus to enter a town openly,*" (v.45) – not that it mattered "*He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.*" As a result of the man's failure to heed Jesus' injunction, the preaching mission within the synagogues of Galilee, reported in v.39, was interrupted.

The other part of Jesus' command instructed him to show himself to the priests, who alone could declare him clean, and to offer the sacrifices prescribed in the Mosaic Law. The procedure to be followed was set forth in Lev. 14:2–31, and involved different offerings depending on whether the man was poor or prosperous. In the first century the man had first to show himself to a priest in his place of residence, after which he must go to Jerusalem to be pronounced clean and to make the prescribed sacrifices.

Jesus' demand that the man comply with Mosaic regulation is qualified by the words "*that will be proof for them.*" This phrase may be interpreted differently depending on whether the testimony is considered to be positive or negative in character, and whether the people or the priests are in view. In keeping with the somber tone of the narrative it seems best to interpret the phrase in the negative sense.

The word used is “*martyrion*” (you might recognize the roots of the word martyr). Translations as “witness” or “testimony” is a more common translation. Is there a difference? Probably not, but the latter translation raise the image of a court of law, accusation and cross examinations.

The leper showing himself to the priests, as required, serves a double purpose. He fulfills the requirements of the law and is declared clean. At the same time, he becomes the testimony and witness about Jesus to the priests.

So, if the priests establish that healing has taken place and accept the sacrifice for cleansing but fail to recognize the person and power through whom healing has come, they will stand condemned by the very evidence which they have accepted. The healing of the leper demonstrated that God had done something new. If they neglect this sign or deliberately refer this gracious act to an evil origin, the accomplished sacrifice will testify against them on the day of judgment. It was, therefore, imperative that the man comply with Jesus’ instruction. It was necessary on his own behalf, but more important, he was to provide the evidence of the new thing God was doing, which if met with unbelief would serve as incriminating evidence against the priests.

It is not known whether the man obeyed the injunction to show himself to a priest. He blatantly disregarded the injunction to silence, and assumed the posture of a missionary, declaring publicly over an extended area what he had experienced from Jesus. The result was that Jesus’ ministry in the synagogue was hampered, for he was no longer able to enter any town without encountering crowds of people waiting to throng one who could heal a leper, claiming benefactions for themselves. This was not the mission Jesus had come to fulfill. When he withdrew to places of solitude the people pursued him, but they understood neither Jesus nor the significance of his withdrawal to a place which recalled the wilderness in which his submission to the Father had been affirmed.

A Final Thought

This incident has an important position in the Marcan outline. It serves to terminate the preaching tour of the Galilean villages and provides the point of transition to the five accounts of controversy which follow (Ch. 2:1–3:6). The account establishes the surpassing nature of the salvation which Jesus brings, for while the Law of Moses provided for the ritual purification of a leper it was powerless to actually purge a man of the disease. In all of the OT only twice is it recorded that God had healed a leper (Num. 12:10 ff.; 2 kings 5:1 ff.), and the rabbis affirmed that it was as difficult to heal the leper as to raise the dead. The cleansing of the leper indicates the new character of God’s action in bringing Jesus among men. Salvation transcends cultic and ritual regulations, which were powerless to arrest the hold that death had upon the living, and issues in radical healing.

Notes

Mark 1:40 leper: A disease in humans (also known as Hansen’s disease) caused by the *bacillus Mycobacterium leprae*. This term “leprosy” is commonly used (more for convenience than medical accuracy) as a translation of Hebrew *šāra ‘at* in the OT and Gk *lepra* in the NT. Scholars now generally agree that OT *sāra ‘at* is not leprosy nor does it include it and that NT *lepra*, if it refers at all to leprosy, does so only as one among many skin conditions. [AYBD 277]

begged: In the Greek, *parakalōn*, which carries the meaning “request, urge; comfort” [EDNT 3:23]. Interestingly, the root is related to the work *Paraclete*, the expression used by St. John to mean the Holy Spirit. While its secular use is wide-ranging, within the NT its use is numerous, but its meaning is virtually limited to the matters of faith and salvation. On the lips of the leper the word hints at more than simple physical healing.

Mark 1:41 moved with pity: *splanchnizomai* – have pity [EDNT 3:265]. A few MSS, of which D and some Old Latin renderings are the most important, read “moved with anger.” Some argue that this is

the harder reading, because it is more difficult to explain a copyist's move from compassion to anger. If it were original, then Jesus' anger would be set against the man's condition, not his request (Luke 13:16). But compassion is slightly more likely to be the original sense, given the overwhelming external spread of the MSS. Mark loved to note Jesus' emotions; here, Jesus acted graciously out of compassion for the man's plight. The healing would be extended with a symbolic touch, since Jesus' power to cleanse was greater than leprosy's power to stain (contrast 2 Kgs 5:1–14; Num 12:9–15). The significance of this is more clear in other Gospel texts (Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22).

Mark 1:42 *immediately*: the cure is instantaneous at the word of Jesus

Mark 1:43 *warning him sternly*. The Gr. verb *embrimaomai* lit. means “to snort” or “be indignant” (Mark 14:5; John 11:33, 38). Jesus sternly restricted the public announcement of what had taken place while urging the leper to follow the law by showing himself to the priest so he could be declared clean (1:44; Lev 14:1–20). Mark notes such calls to silence with respect to demons (1:34; 3:12), those healed (1:43–44; 5:43; 7:36), and the disciples (8:30; 9:9).

Mark 1:44 *that will be proof for them*. This was a recognition of God's gracious work of healing through Jesus. The Greek also allows for the interpretation, “a testimony against them.” In other spots where this expression appears, it is negative, meaning “against them” (6:11; 13:9). The meaning appears to be that the evidence of God's acting through Jesus (when the healed man offered a sacrifice) would stand as a testimony against the priests when they came to reject the reality that God was working through Jesus.

Mark 1:45 *But the man went away and began to publicize the whole matter*. The cleansed leper did not obey Jesus and Jesus got the publicity he had hoped to avoid. **publicize.** Interestingly, the man “preached” (*kērussō*) his testimony.

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