

Homily for Parishes in the Western region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 13th October 2019 – Pentecost 18

Readings: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7
2Timothy 2:(1-7) 8-15

Psalm 66:1-11
Luke 17:11-19

When I first went to Papua New Guinea in 1986 I was based at the Franciscan friary just outside Popondetta. It was a very dynamic community to be part of with clear ministries of evangelism to young people, and care of those on the margins of society. In the hostel we would host women and children escaping situations of domestic violence. Often the brothers would give shelter to those families for weeks, while giving counsel to the men who were violent. There were some very moving reconciliations, with the men being held accountable for their actions by the Franciscans, and by their extended family.

At that time PNG had one psychiatrist for the whole country, who was a Franciscan brother based in Port Moresby. His name was Brother Andrew and he had an extraordinary ministry over many years. There were also twenty seven psychiatric nurses in the country who were over-worked and under-resourced. So the majority of those living with some form of mental illness were cared for by their families, by their community, and by religious communities like the Anglican Franciscans in Popondetta. When families, or villages, needed respite they brought people to the friary with some vegetables to help with meals and these friends were taken into the life of the community... and, not surprisingly, there were moments which were tricky!

There were others who would come and stay for a few days, or a few weeks, to regroup, re-energise, and return to the complex challenges of their lives. One of these was a woman called Linca who had been widowed with six young children to raise, in a society that had no Government support for those who were struggling. Linca was a very resourceful person who had been taught to use a sewing machine as a teenager and with this skill made skirts and blouses and vestments for the church. When I was being prepared for Ordination in Australia, Linca made a stole out of tapa cloth, lined with cotton, and hemmed with shells. The stole was painted by the mother of someone I'd worked with as a youth leader, in a little village called Aragasusu. I treasure this stole and usually wear it in Lent.

But there is a piece of the story I haven't mentioned. Linca was the first person I'd ever met who had leprosy. Sure, it was controlled with daily medication but I never saw her without socks on. No matter how hot and humid it was Linca would hide her damaged feet from hungry flies and the judging eyes of others by wearing socks. Whenever I read about an encounter between Jesus and someone with leprosy my thoughts inevitably go to Linca.

Of course at the time of Jesus there was no medication for this disease and there was an understanding among the Jewish community that leprosy was a curse from God for something that you had done. To limit the risk of this contagion those with leprosy were expelled from their homes and were not allowed to live within the safety of the city walls. They lived instead in caves, and relied on the charity of family members, and strangers. They were not allowed to participate in community life, and were literally outcasts.

When we remember this, the encounter between Jesus and the ten lepers described in today's Gospel is extraordinary. Remember they came to him, and in my imagination I imagine the disciples moving away from Jesus covering their mouths with distaste, and looking back astonished as Jesus waited for the lepers to come closer. He did not reject them! He did not follow the cultural expectation that there should be no contact with them, but rather he listened. He heard about their longing to be healed, and he healed them. Why would they not want to be healed? Why would they not want to be reunited with their families, sleep in their own beds, and be free again from the judgement of their community?

In the grace of God they were healed and nine of them raced on with their lives. Only one recognised that the source of their healing was God working through Jesus and he came back to say, 'Thank you!' The fact that he was a Samaritan was a big surprise, because Samaritans were regarded with great prejudice by the Jewish community.

There is so much in this Gospel encounter for us to consider and reflect upon and be challenged by. Let's first identify with the ten lepers. Like them we long for healing and wholeness and we bring our longing to Jesus. Like those ten lepers our longing is transformed by grace and we know ourselves to be deeply loved by God, welcome in a community of faith. However, like the nine we so often take it for granted, and race on with our lives. I am deeply challenged by the Samaritan leper who returned to say, 'Thank you!' In many ways that is one of the main things we do when we come to church. It is not an accident that the prayer offered before communion is called the Prayer of Thanksgiving! But, what about those days between Sundays? Do I recognise God's blessings, God's grace, God's love, each day? May God's Holy Spirit help us recognise the gift of life, and love, and health, and friendship each day this week.

Let's imagine now that we are among the disciples as the ten lepers come near. We don't stand with Jesus but rather move away. So... who do we walk away from? Who have we written off? Who do we not want to be contaminated by? Who are the people, like Linca, at the margins of our community because of their mental health issues, their family problems, their addictions, or their ethnicity? What might Jesus be saying to you, and me, when we have the courage to name these people in our mind?

As disciples of Jesus we seek to be more like him. Relate with God in the way that he related with God. Relate with other people, in the way that he related with other people... even when the rest of his society had no time for them and had written them off. Are we open to hearing the longings of those on the margins of our community, and to being used by God to bring about transformation and hope? To share with others the joy and peace we have each day because of our faith in God. To share with others some of the resources we've been blessed with, so that they have a sense of being cared for, and being valued... maybe for the first time.

I suggest that most of us are healed lepers, who need to be more thankful in our journeys of life and faith, and more confident in introducing others to the one we call, 'Lord!'

Let's pray... "God of healing and hope, we give thanks for the gift of faith. Through your Spirit give us confidence, and greater ability, to share this with others. We pray in Jesus' Name. Amen"