

Accept This Foreigner

Matthew Pullar

One of [the lepers], when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him – and he was a Samaritan.

Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

(Luke 17:15-19)

Lepers were despised in society. They were rejected and cast out of the city – no doubt for good reasons, their contagion being so great that surely no-one wanted to be near them. Yet there was something deeply dehumanising about how they were treated – something that we are forever seeing in our society. We think not about the person but about the "contagion" they carry. We disassociate ourselves from those we think will harm us; we do not think of the harm we do through our disassociation.

But the man in this story was more than just a leper; he was a Samaritan, which, if we use the term "leper" in the metaphorical sense that it carries in the West nowadays, means he was a double leper: rejected and excluded on two counts.

On one hand, Jesus' words to him seem harsh: he does not seem to delight in the man's extravagant worship. At first, he sounds as if he is rejecting the man just as everyone else has done. *What?* he seems to exclaim. *Can the whole Jewish world find no-one better to worship me?*

Yet, when we look at the words that follow, we see that this is not the case. You see, the words that sound harsh to us are not directed at the man himself; in a sense, they are directed at whoever has ears to hear him, no doubt the many people that are following him around and either hanging on his every word or seeking to trip him up whenever the opportunity presents itself. In dramatic terms, we would say that Jesus is speaking an "aside" – words intended for the audience, not for his immediate interlocutor. Not that he has ever shied away from being blunt to the person he is speaking to (the Syrophenecian woman of Mark 7:24-30 springs to mind), yet here the first words Jesus speaks are clearly distinguished from the words he speaks to the man, signalled by, "*Then he said to him...*", whereas the previous is merely prefaced by "*Jesus asked*", phrased almost as an open question, and the man himself spoken of in third person, by the not-too-flattering name of "this foreigner".

The comparison with the Syrophenecian woman perhaps goes deeper than it seems at first. The similarities are clear: both involve someone excluded from Jewish society being healed; both also involve Jesus being strangely blunt before declaring that their faith has made them well. The differences, however, seem to outweigh the similarities, except in this one key point: Jesus, it seems, does not actually mean the words that he says regarding the person he heals. In both

cases, he shows them unreserved love and compassion. They are (or, in the woman's case, her daughter is) healed, and urged to go off into the freedom that Jesus' healing brings. Thus his words seem odd, even if their immediate offense is softened by the fact that he still treats them with love.

Here, however, is a possible explanation; the Syrophoenecian woman is rewarded for her boldness, and the leper is rewarded (or praised) for his devotion to Jesus. In both cases, Jesus draws attention to their status as foreigners and outcasts, yet in both cases he heals them. If, indeed, Jesus *is* addressing the passers-by as much as he is addressing the people in question, then it seems possible that he is using the conversation to highlight the typical stance that would be taken regarding this person, thus also highlighting how irregular his own response is.

Note, in both cases, Jesus continues to show a Jewish affiliation. When he heals the lepers, it is by means of the Torah and its regulations regarding lepers. When he heals the Syrophoenecian woman's daughter, it is not without emphasising that his primary mission field is still the Jewish people; she is simply a beneficiary of this ministry. Nevertheless, there is something deeply radical in Jesus' actions, and he does not resist the opportunity to highlight this for the people who are nearby. In the case of the lepers, the significance is particularly great: not one of the Jewish lepers shows the slightest bit of gratitude, while the Samaritan leper is filled with thanks – not unlike the two brothers of the parable found only a chapter and a half earlier. The amazing element of this story is not only in the fact that Jesus heals the Samaritan; that itself is passed over quite quickly. The weight is given to the fact that this man returns to praise Jesus, while God's own people do not do so. By labelling him "this foreigner", Jesus speaks as the people of his day would have spoken. Yet what seems a derogatory term at first actually carries a subversive power; the irony of Jesus' words are particularly poignant. Yes, this man is a "foreigner", yet he acts more as a child of God than any of the "natural" children do here.

The ten lepers are at first presented on an equal footing; they are all sick, all rejected, all outcasts. They are merely lepers. Likewise, all are healed without discrimination. They are separated then not by their condition or their ethnicity but by how they respond to God's grace. Here the faith of the Syrophoenecian woman becomes a key reference point once more. In the story of the ten lepers, the undercurrent of Jesus' words is that the ingratitude of the nine Jewish lepers may indeed lead to the food being taken away from the children and given instead to the dogs (Mark 7:27). And we know from the book of Acts that soon those who have been degraded to "dog" status will become children, while the children who do not receive their father's gifts with thankful hearts will have those gifts taken away from them.

Thus, "this foreigner" becomes more than the exception in the group of nine. He becomes more than a foreigner. He, like all Gentiles who receive God's grace with a thankful heart, will become a child of God. Yes, "this man", Jesus, "welcomes sinners" (Luke 15:2), and this man also accepts foreigners. And thanks be to God that he does, for I would not know him at all if it were not for that fact.