

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 12th October 2025 – 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 a Franciscan friary near Jegerata village. It was a very dynamic community to be part of it had clear ministries of evangelism to young people, and ministries of care for those who were on the margins of society.

In the friary hostel we would host women and children escaping domestic violence and often the brothers would give shelter to those families for weeks, while giving counsel to the men who had perpetrated the violence. Over the years there were some moving reconciliations, with the men being held accountable in an ongoing way by the Franciscans, and by their extended family.

In 1986 PNG had one psychiatrist for the whole country and he was a Franciscan brother based in Port Moresby. His name was Brother Andrew, and he had an extraordinary ministry but nationally could only work with the more extreme cases. In addition to Brother Andrew there were twenty-seven psychiatric nurses in urban hospitals across the country who were all over-worked and under-resourced.

Consequently, the majority of those living with some form of mental illness were cared for by their families, by their village, and by religious communities like the Anglican Franciscans. When families, or villages, needed respite they brought people to the friary with some vegetables to help with meals, and then these friends were taken into the life of the community... and, not surprisingly, there were moments which were tricky!

There were other people who would come to the friary to stay for a few days, or a few weeks, to regroup and re-energise before returning to the complex challenges of their daily lives. One of these was called Linca who had been widowed with six young children, in a society that had no Government support. Linca was a resourceful person who had been taught to use a sewing machine as a teenager and with this skill she made skirts, blouses, and vestments for church workers. When I was preparing for Ordination in Australia, Linca made a stole using tapa cloth, lined with cotton, and hemmed with shells. The stole was painted by the mother of a friend I'd worked with as a youth leader and I treasure this much used stole by wearing it each year during Lent.

However, there is a piece of the story I haven't mentioned. For, Linca was the first person I'd ever met who had leprosy. 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. So, whenever I read about an encounter between Jesus and someone with leprosy my thoughts go to Linca.

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

As we bear this in mind, the encounter between Jesus and the ten lepers described in today's Gospel is clearly extraordinary. As the lepers approached I imagine the disciples moving away from Jesus covering their mouths with fear, before looking back astonished as Jesus waited for them to come. Jesus did not reject them, or, turn his back! He did not follow the cultural expectation that there should be no contact, but rather he leaned in and 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 others?

In the grace of God they were all healed and nine of them raced on with their lives. Only one recognised that the source of his healing was God working through Jesus and that man came back to say, 'Thank you!' The fact that he was a Samaritan would have been a surprise, because Samaritans were despised by Jewish religious teaching.

I think there is much in this encounter for us to think about and be challenged by today.

Let's first try identifying with the ten lepers for like them we long for healing and wholeness, and we bring these longings to Jesus. Then, like those ten lepers, our longing is fulfilled by grace - and we know ourselves to be deeply loved by the Creator of all and that is liberating! However, like the nine lepers I think we too often take this incredible gift for granted, and we race on with our lives without expressing gratitude.

So, I am deeply challenged by the Samaritan leper who returned to say, 'Thank you!' In many ways that is one of the things we do when we come to church and it's not an accident that the prayer offered before communion is called the Prayer of Thanksgiving! But, what

about those days between Sundays? Do we recognise God's blessings, God's grace, God's love... each day? May God's Holy Spirit help us recognise and be thankful for the gifts of life, and love, and health, and friendship... at some stage each day this week.

But now, let's imagine that we are among the disciples as the ten lepers come near. We don't stand with Jesus, but instead move away covering our mouths in distaste...

Who do we similarly 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 family problems, their mental illness, their addiction, or their ethnicity? What might Jesus be saying to you, and to me, when we have the courage to recognise these people in our lives?

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 in God's grace help that longing find expression and fulfillment? Are we open to share with others the joy and peace we have because of our faith in God? And... are we open to share some of the resources, time, and ability, God has gifted us with?

In God's grace may we seek to be more thankful, like the Samaritan leper, and more compassionate, like the Christ we follow.

Amen