

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

12 February 2012

2 Kings 5: 1-14; Ps 30; 1 Cor 9: 24-27; Mark 1: 40-45

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Do you remember as a child walking down a street and having to make sure you didn't step on the lines between the paving stones. You've got to keep in the squares.

It's quite difficult sometimes, when adults are marching you along – and they don't seem to notice – but it's very important! AA Milne has a lovely poem called 'Lines and Squares', and about the bears that wait to get you – if you tread on the lines instead of the squares …

What's this about? As adults we might demythologise the bears, but there's something about lines and borders, a need we have to have clear demarcations. Think how we like to separate outside from inside. Outside is dirty, inside is clean. If you have muddy boots, they're ok outside, but you don't bring them inside. People often talk about foreigners, and foreign food, as 'dirty' – they belong over there, not here. They're dirty, we're clean.

But what if we *tread on the lines*? What about someone of *mixed* race, for example: are they clean like us, or dirty like them? They will almost always be defined as dirty – to keep clear boundaries, so we know what's what and who's who. Or what about trans-gender, when we're not quite sure if someone is a man or a woman? It makes us uneasy.

A lot of anxiety gets raised by these issues. Think of the anger raised by traitors and spies, who look like 'one of us' but turn out to be 'one of them'. Think of the energy that goes into who we in Australia allow to cross our national borders, and whether they have permission. The energy seems well in excess of the practical problems involved: there's some anxiety here about keeping clear borders, knowing who is in and who is out.

In Africa, India and in the ancient world, a lot of this kind of anxiety focuses on *lepers*. These are people who happen to suffer from a particular kind of disease, but call them 'lepers' and they sound like a special kind of being, not quite human.

The solution is usually to say they're dirty, 'unclean'; require them to go around saying 'unclean, unclean'; and keep them out, consign them to leper colonies like a kind of zoo. Is it because they're contagious? – but lots of diseases are contagious; we don't have colonies of flu-sufferers. Something else is going on.

Anthropologists say that lepers are special, not for medical reasons, but because they raise anxieties about *boundaries*. Leprosy is a skin disease, and the skin is the boundary of the body. People with skin that is breaking up make us (unconsciously) aware of all those other fuzzy boundaries and the danger we associate with half-castes

and hermaphrodites, and talking animals – ok in stories, but what if you met one? I bet Billies could tell a tale or two…

Lepers in the Bible raise all these anxieties. There are two whole chapters in Leviticus instructing priests how to discern when someone has enough bumps on their skin to show they are 'lepers' and need to be excluded from the community. (Lev 13 and 14, if you want to read them.)

And it isn't only people: in the Bible, clothes can get leprosy, and so can houses. And oddly, if you have the disease all over your body, so you are leprous from head to toe, then you're officially 'clean', and can come inside. Medically it doesn't make any sense at all, but it's all about symbolism: what makes people anxious is someone who is half normal and half not; if you're completely normal, or completely abnormal, that's ok!

So we build walls around us, and put the oddities outside, to make ourselves feel safe.

Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall* subtly pokes fun at our need for walls and borders. The speaker is a farmer, with a dry-stone wall between his land and his neighbour's. Mysteriously the stones keep falling off – 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall', he says – so he and his neighbour have to get together each year to mend it. It sounds as though they never meet except to mend this wall, and they're careful not to step into each other's land as they do it. But you might wonder why. The speaker comments:

> There where it is we do not *need* the wall:
> He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
> My apple trees will never get across
> And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
> He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors'. …

'Good fences make good neighbors'. Is that true? Well, maybe sometimes. As the poem says, you would need a wall if there were cows – but here there are no cows. So why is it so important? What are we trying to keep out, and why?

Jesus shows where he stands on the question of boundaries. When a leper came to him he was moved with pity (the text says his bowels were churned up), and he did what you don't do to a leper, he *touched* him: 'and the leper was made clean'.

The power of God desires to bridge that gap, to bring the outsider in. The touch is a moment of connection between divided bodies and divided hearts. A moment of healing. Is that what Frost is hinting at? – 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down'.

The Old Testament story of Naaman is all about *walls and borders* too. Naaman the general is a leper, of course, and no doubt that means he has to struggle with the fear that at some point he will be excluded from the palace and the community, and his life will be effectively at an end.

But there's also the border between two nations, Israel and Aram (which is Syria); and he is told to bathe in the River Jordan, the symbolic border between the land of Israel

and the desert; and when the king gets upset what does he do? – he symbolically 'tears his clothes', makes a border between the two parts.

There is also a lot in the story about *levels and hierarchies* in these two separated nations. The main characters are Naaman on one side, and Elisha the prophet on the other. But each has a king above them; and below them there are servants. In Naaman's case, he has many servants, with their chariots and horses, but he also has a wife, a bit below him, and she has a servant girl, an Israelite slave-girl captured in war.

The story starts with this foreign slave-girl, the most insignificant person, who is surprisingly helpful, considering her plight. But she doesn't think about herself, she thinks about her master and how Elisha has the power to cure him of his leprosy. So there's a chain: she tells her mistress, who tells her husband Naaman, who tells the king – a chain from the bottom of society to the top.

But now we notice that most of the communication in this story is up and down. It's very difficult, it seems, to talk horizontally, *across the divide* between nations, and people never do it directly.

When the King of Aram wants to talk to the King of Israel, he sends the message downwards via a servant, Naaman. That keeps the other king in his place. The King of Israel of course thinks it's all a ploy to create a excuse for crossing the border – hence the tearing of the garments.

And when Elisha intervenes, he likewise does not talk directly to his equal, Naaman; he talks upwards to the king, and downwards to his servant, and sends a servant out with a message to Naaman at the gate. No doubt that's why Naaman is so cross: who does this prophet think he is?, etc But when he lowers himself go down to the Jordan – that border of the holy land – and bathes there, then he is cured and made clean.

The whole story is about whether the grace of God can flow across that political divide. If the border had not been there, Naaman could have been healed by Elisha long ago. Not everybody would want that. – Why would you want to heal an Aramean general? When Jesus refers to this story, in the synagogue in Nazareth (in Luke 4), to show that God desires the healing of all people, he is nearly lynched by an angry mob. We don't want foreigners here, thank you very much.

But what prevents Naaman from being cured is not only the border between two nations, it's the border between cynicism and hope. This is a story about two kings and a general, and [apart from the chariots and horses that Naaman goes about with (why?),] there are two separate mentions of warfare: the Aramean raid which carries off the Israelite girl; and the King of Israel's assumption that seeking the grace of God can only be making an excuse to invade.

What breaks through this cynicism and hostility at the top of society is the delightfully naïve faith of the slave girl at the bottom: 'If only my Lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy'. Just like that! But the story shows her youthful naivety is life-giving where their aged cynicism is not.

You could say the story hints that the hand of God allowed her to be carried off, across that border, in order to bring grace into the situation. There's a nice touch at

the end: the story that begins with this 'young girl' concludes with Naaman's flesh being restored, we're told, 'like the flesh of a young boy'. Does that make the point about the transforming grace of God?

'Something there is that doesn't love a wall'. When the leper came to Jesus he showed the same naïve faith: 'If you choose, you can make me clean!'

But only God could cleanse leprosy! The two chapters in Leviticus are not about how to cure it, but for the priests to know how to recognise and name this terrible condition. That's why Jesus sends this one off to the priest, afterwards, to get his official discharge.

But he comes to Jesus with the faith that God can and does cleanse lepers and will do so through Jesus as once he did that through Elisha the prophet.

Jesus' action shows that he is right, that the walls we put up between people, to keep us feeling safe, mostly keep us safe from God. God? We don't want that sort here. You never know what might happen.

When Jesus stretches out his hand and touches the leper he reunites the universe. He shows there is no separation of heaven and earth as if they were two places divided by a firmament. There is only one world transfigured by the creative loving energy of God who constantly seeks to break down walls, borders and barriers to draw all things to himself – through healing, through the silence of prayer, through deep listening, through the word which liberates people from fear.

'Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down.'