

# Healing and Gratitude

KATHLEEN RUSHTON reflects on the story of Jesus healing ten men with leprosy in Luke 17:11-19.

When travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jews went usually through the Jordan Valley rather than through Samaria (Luke 9:52-53). However, Samaritans feature in Jesus's journey to Jerusalem—Jesus scolds disciples who wanted fire to destroy the Samaritan village which had not received them (Lk 9:54-55). And in a parable, a Samaritan extends what is meant to a neighbour (Lk 10:33).

In Lk 17:11 Jesus went “through the region between Samaria and Galilee”. In a village in that in-between region, and in a story found only in Luke, is an example of the faith of social outcasts being highlighted over that of insiders.

## Background to the Text

The medical condition of the 10 men who approach Jesus is not what is known today as Hansen's disease or leprosy. Medical scientists and biblical scholars believe that true leprosy, which is only mildly contagious, did not exist in first century Palestine. What might be called “biblical leprosy” describes several chronic flaky or scaly skin conditions in Leviticus 14-15. These afflictions were feared because they made individuals and communities unclean or impure.

Scripture speaks often of those with chronic illnesses and afflictions. The lament psalms link physical affliction and incapacity with poverty. Psalm 31:10 tells us: “My strength is diminished in my poverty and my bones waste away.” The poetry of Job 29:12-17 links the poor with sickness and incapacity.

Restrictions applied to people who could offer worship. They must not have bodily defects. Anyone who was blemished, blind, lame, had a mutilated face, “a limb too long”, a broken foot or hand, an itching disease or scabs, could not offer sacrifice

(Lev 22:17-23). God sides with the oppressed, the poor, the marginalised and the outcast. They receive God's special care and attention. In contrast, those afflicted by chronic illness are pushed aside by the healthy and by those who control access to the centres of public life and religion.

## Asking for Mercy

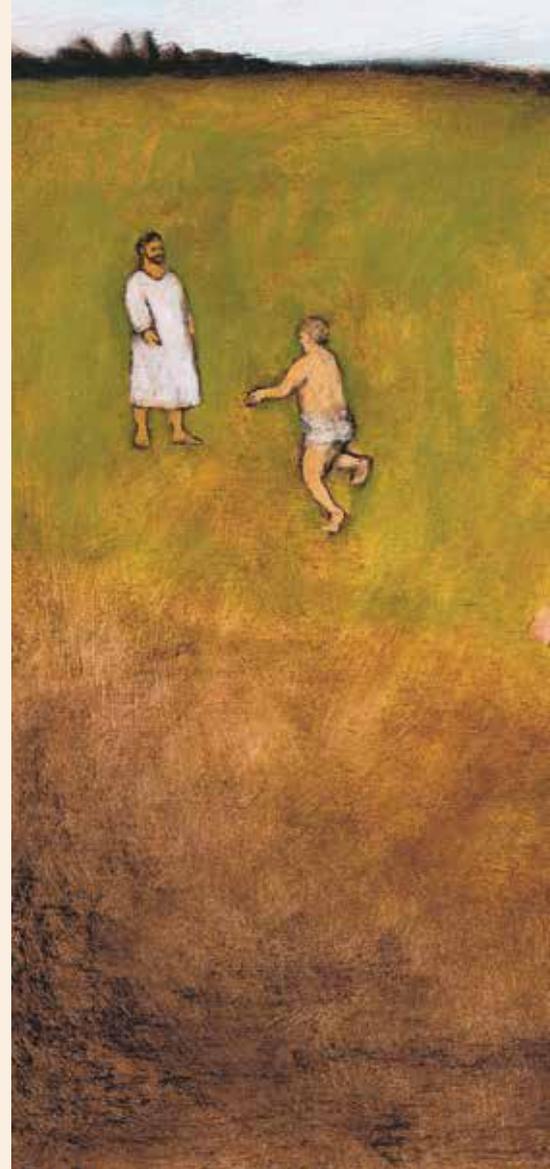
In so many ways, this story links with the theology found in Luke's text. The men approach and call out: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” These outsiders are insiders—the disciples and these 10 are the only characters who called Jesus “Master” (Lk 5:5; 8:24, 45; 9:33, 49).

Showing “mercy” (*eleos*) is associated with God's visitation. In her song, Mary refers to God's mercy (Lk 1:50, 54). God's great mercy was shown to Elizabeth (Lk 1:58). Zechariah tells of God's mercy being promised to our ancestors (Lk 1:72) and that by “the tender mercy of God, the dawn from on high will break upon us” (Lk 1:78). The cry of 10 men echoes the cry for mercy of the poor man (Lk 16:24) and of the man who is blind (Lk 18:38-39).

## Significance of Samaritan Returning

These outsiders express the important qualities of discipleship, shown earlier in the Gospel by the mother of Jesus (Lk 1:38; 2:19) and affirmed in the Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:46-49). They heard the word of Jesus and acted on it by going to show themselves to the priests to be examined and then undergo ritual cleansing as prescribed in Leviticus 13-14.

Although the 10 men are all outcasts they mix together regardless of being Jew or Samaritan. One of them—a Samaritan while presumably the others are Jews—returns “praising God” (Lk 17:15) which in Luke is a faith response to the wonders of God. “He prostrated himself” on the sacred earth at the feet of Jesus and thanked him.



The Samaritan's healing has tones of resurrection. He is released from a form of death. Jesus tells him to rise up and “go on your way” (Lk 17:19). His faith has not cured him but has saved him—as did the faith of the anointing woman in house of Simon (Lk 7:50), the woman with a haemorrhage (Lk 8:48) and the repentant criminal at the cross (Lk 23:43).

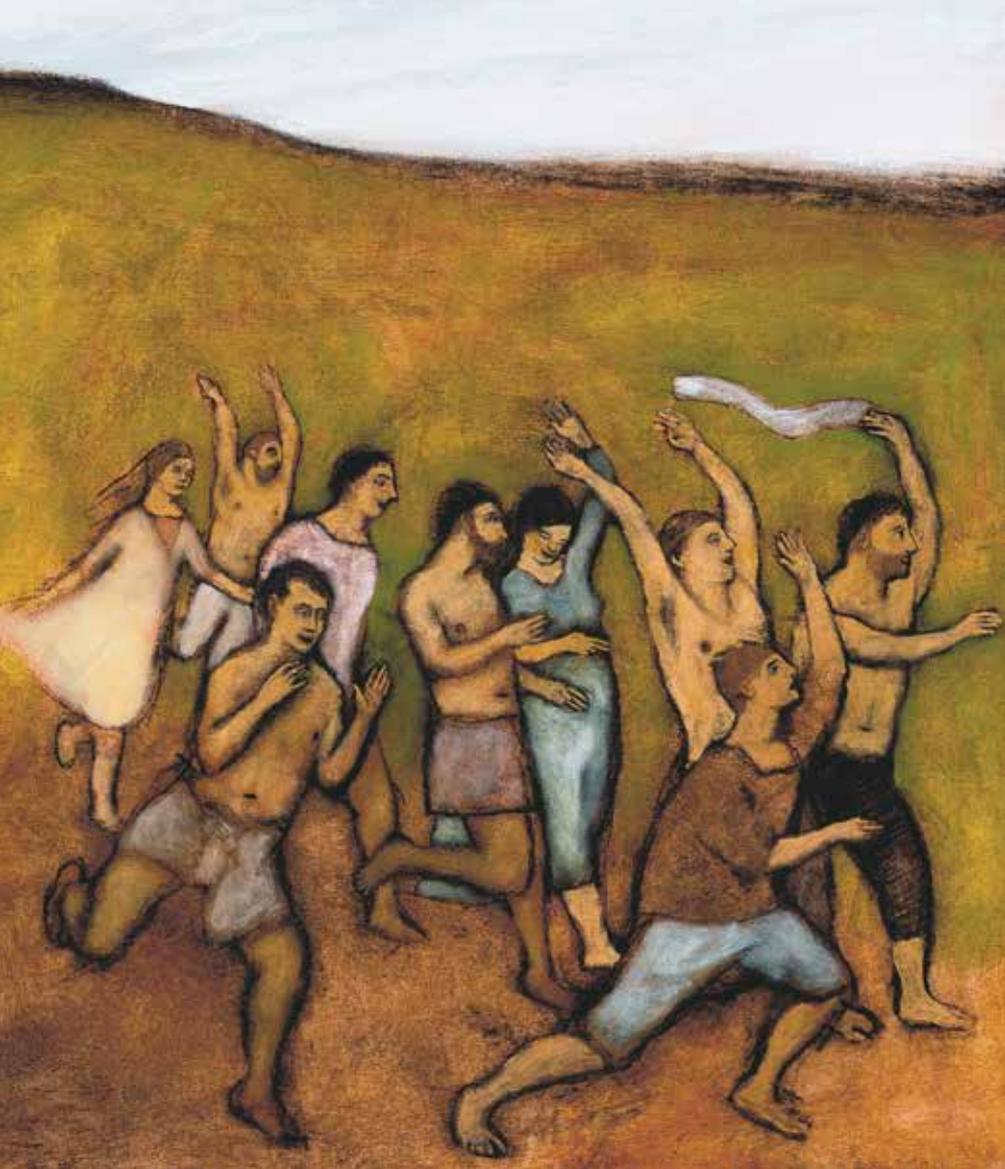
## This Story for Us

In the New Testament, the noun leprosy (*lepra*) and the adjective leprous (*lepros*) are found only in the Synoptic Gospels. Leprosy names the disease of a man Jesus healed (Mk 1:42, Mt 8:31; Lk 5:12,13). Luke adds that “the man was full of leprosy.” According to Mark and Luke, “the leprosy left him,” while Matthew says: “his leprosy was cleansed.”

The adjective “leprous” is used of Simon at whose house Jesus is dining when a woman anoints his head (Mk 14:3; Mt 26:6). The commission of Jesus to his disciples includes “make clean the leprous” (Mt 10:8). “The leprous

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thank Jesus. We can reflect on our own giving and receiving gratitude especially for God's providence which we can easily overlook.

### Leprosy Today

I visited the graves of people who had died at the leprosy colony on Quail Island, in Lyttelton Harbour. It was established in 1907, the only one in New Zealand. In 1925 the remaining people were sent to a colony in Fiji. About 30 years ago I accompanied a Missionary Sister of the Society of Mary who worked with the Pacific Leprosy Foundation on the Tonga island of Vava'u. The biggest challenge they faced was shame – felt by those who had the disease and their families.

And leprosy still exists – the Pacific Leprosy Foundation provides information about the disease itself and those who suffer from it. Leprosy is a disease of poverty and remains a serious and social problem in the Pacific and New Zealand. Today, the Foundation manages projects to assist those affected by leprosy in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Kiribati, New Zealand and Tuvalu. Medical advances now provide both a cure for leprosy and for prevention. If resourced sufficiently, this disease could not only be mitigated but eliminated. 🗨️

13 October Luke 17:11-19  
 RL 28th Sunday Ordinary Time  
 RCL 18th Sunday After Pentecost

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are cleansed" is found in the report Jesus sends back to John the Baptist (Mt 11:5; Lk 7:22). "Leprous" is used to describe many who were afflicted in the time of the prophet Elisha (4:27). And in our healing story are 10 leprosy men (*leproi andres*) (Lk 17:12).

But the word "leper" is not found. Persons are not named by, or after, or from the disease which afflicts them. Some Bible translations are mindful of this. The New Jerusalem Bible has "ten men suffering from a virulent skin-disease." The Rheims translation (first published 1582) has "ten men who were lepers." Other versions have "ten lepers."

The implications and outcomes of translating the adjective leprosy (*lepros*) into the noun leper or lepers, can make us take stock of the ways we might label people with a sickness or disability.

This story invites us to be mindful about how we name people. Giving people the name of their sickness, disability, race or other difference from us, hinders us from relating to

them as neighbours, fellow disciples, friends. Instead we want to focus on the person – not on the condition.

In Luke's Gospel the 10 men society had cast out are shown to have recognised Jesus who healed them. Significantly in this story the person who was most marginalised, not just by skin condition but also by race, is the only one who returns to



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