

Sermon on Luke 17: 11-19

10 – 9 = 1

I was never particularly good at Maths at school.

It was always something of a foreign language to me.

A mystery.

I came to English and history much more fluently which was probably in part the reason I enjoyed those subjects much more.

However, the maths of today's Gospel reading I can do.

10 – 9 = 1.

10 lepers come to Jesus.

Now to be a leper in the ancient world was the cruellest of afflictions.

You were ostracised from your community, cast out of any human contact except with others of a similar plight, and forced to yell out anytime you were coming near so people knew to avoid you.

A pretty bleak position.

In this text we're told the 10 lepers 'stood at a distance'.

But they cry out and Jesus hears them and sends them off to the priest for their ceremonial cleansing...

On the way, the text tells us rather unceremoniously, they were cleansed.

All 10 were healed.

Yet as we learn in the very next verse, only one came back praising God and to thank Jesus.

'Were not all ten cleansed?', he says, 'Where are the other nine?'

Did no-one but this foreigner return to give praise to God?

Then in a phrase laden with allusion, primarily to the resurrection hope, Jesus tells the one, Rise and Go, your faith has made you well.

10 – 9 = 1.

As much as Maths was never really my thing, even I know that's a pretty low percentage.

So Luke loves to do this.

He loves to offer little vignette's that problematize all the assumptions of the surrounding culture.

Jesus is up in Gentile territory.

He's 'on the border' as the text says.

There's the first 'crossing over'.

Then he doesn't dismiss or ignore or flee from the lepers as would be customary, he heals them.

There's the second.

Then the only one to return in gratitude is the foreigner, the Samaritan.

Strike 3.

And just as his audience would have been incredulous when it is the Good Samaritan who stops by the road to help the man in the ditch, not the priest or levite, so Jesus is incredulous here that only one, and only the Samaritan, the foreigner has returned.

Where are the other nine?

Maybe they're as bad at maths as I am.

The story is not really about the healing, though of course we're supposed to see again that Jesus is the one who heals, who restores, who cleanses, the one who brings new life - he has that power...

It's more a story that probes into the questions of faithful identity, of who we are, and of how we respond to Jesus' border crossing love both in our relationship with God and with others?

I can imagine for most of us, we have at some time or another found ourselves as the outsider.

As the one who, for whatever reason, didn't fit in: a situation where we were the 'foreigners' and were feeling isolated.

Both Jesus and the Samaritan are in this category.

Jesus, a Jew, is walking the border of Samaria, entering villages, engaging with those the wider community has shunned.

Likewise, the Samaritan is approaching a Jewish Rabbi, going to the very person who by rights should pronounce him unclean and begging for mercy.

It's a hard business to be the outsider.

To be the one with little to rely on as we all know.

I can imagine too that we all know what it is like to be the one in the dominant group.

When we feel reassured by having similar kinds of people or customs to our own.

When we feel reassured and comfortable in our own skin.

I remember when my brother and sister-in-law came to my confirmation service some 18 or so years ago.

They were from a Pentecostal church and had little exposure to other traditions.

After the service my brother in law spoke to me in a somewhat concerned tone, 'Why did we say we believe to the catholic church?', he asked.

We had of course affirmed together in the creed that we believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, where 'catholic' simply means universal.

Yet, in a new and strange context, he was unsure of what he was being asked to affirm, and so was questioning what he had heard.

I quietly explained what it meant and he felt much better.

We've all been on either side of this equation and my hunch is we've probably all experienced loving and perhaps not so loving responses.

Perhaps there are times in our lives when we look back and see we could have been more thoughtful in this regard ourselves in relation to others.

In the movie *School Ties* (you knew it was coming), a prestigious New England private school, steeped in middle-upper class Christian America in the 50s recruits a Jewish boy who is a brilliant footballer.

Knowing his religious identity may cause some raised eyebrows his coach says to him, 'Don't say any more than you need to.

Play your cards close to your chest'.

As he enters the school community the other boys welcome him as one of their own.

He's the bright new star of the team and quickly becoming popular.

Inevitably, at some point in the story, the truth comes out and suddenly everything changes.

All the typical prejudices emerge and he is made to feel very quickly like an outsider.

He hadn't changed of course, yet suddenly he was seen as 'different' and so battlelines were drawn.

This story is as old as the hills.

Isolate the minority, project all the bad things of the world onto the outsider so we have someone to blame.

It's not hard to see in much of our national and international dialogues exactly the same process going on.

The embers of the politics of fear are easily fanned and the fire can get burning very quickly.

As Christians, committed to walking the boundaries and loving across borders, much prayer and thought should be given to how we respond.

It's easy to offer convention, expected responses, it's a far more demanding task to perhaps risk derision or even our own sense of comfort in order to cross the border, to eliminate the boundary, and reach out in love.

As hard as this may be, we do well to remember that God has crossed the border of our humanity to reach out to us in love.

Sometimes I think we have gotten so used to singing 'What a friend we have in Jesus' and seeing Jesus wholly as our human companion, we forget that God is so far beyond us, so different in kind, not Jesus in my pocket.

In this story he heals and he declares the 1 returning leper well.

And he is making his way to Jerusalem where momentous events will unfold, events which have shaped the faith for ever after and still rock us back on our heels when we consider what is at the heart of our faith.

The resurrection of the Son of God.

Rise and go, your faith has made you well, Jesus says.

God refuses to stand at a distance from us, he comes up close in Jesus, but he is never our possession.

Never one made in our image, rather we are made in his.

We talk a lot about the comfort of faith, but loving in difference can be uncomfortable.

And for Jesus, it would ultimately cost him his life in the most harrowing of circumstances.

And yet he goes to the cross for us.

He takes the 'crossway'.

He endures that hard way for us.

He crosses over from eternity to death, in order that we might be saved.

That we might not feel like outsiders from God, isolated in our difference, but rather gathered in despite our difference.

I may be speaking to the wrong crowd as you're all here worshipping in church this day, but the question remains do we return in gratitude to God like the healed Samaritan did to Jesus?

Do we praise God in a loud voice and give thanks that he has crossed over to us?

Is it $10 - 9 = 1$?

10% return in faith?

90% go on their way?

Walk on by?

Are we thankful for small mercies?

Small graces that come to us in the form of others, perhaps others who are different to us, from a different land, or with different ideas, but have the divine tinge of grace attached?

Or even larger things where we feel we have experienced true healing?

Healing of relationships?

Of body and mind?

Healing of hurts we've perhaps carried for a lifetime?

Faith isn't easy.

It's a hard way of learning to live in God's way rather than our own.

There's always more to learn, more growth to be had, more growing closer to God in relationship and faith.

I wonder if we can be the ones who cross over to others in order to bring healing?

If we can live in a world that likes to draw divisions between people and be those who bring people together?

Who stand in the face of fear and offer love instead, for perfect love, as St John says, drives out all fear.

If we can love across boundaries even when it means risking appearance or reputation or even friendships?

I've never been good at maths, but I know that $10 - 9 = 1$.

1 who returned.

1 who gave thanks.

It's not a great return in anyone's language.

Perhaps we can help bring the percentages up, both as those who are grateful for what we have received in Christ, and those willing to offer his grace to the entire world with all that we are.

However you look at it, and however good or not you are maths, it seems to me that's an equation that certainly adds up.

In Jesus' name. **Amen.**