



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday, January 29th 2017 – Epiphany IV

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Ghost ✠

We meet Jesus today, in the Gospel of St Matthew, fresh off the Sermon Mount; and we are brought to face to the Jesus we have known all our lives. It is the loving, healing, and miraculous Jesus, the Jesus our parents told us of as they read us Luke's Nativity at Christmas, or the Jesus we found, and do find, as we read his Sermon on The Mount in times of trial. We also meet a Jesus whose ministry is changing from one of Teaching with authority to Practicing with authority. And we see Him Creating, creating the pattern for the Christian Missionary.

Matthew tells us the first of these miracles was the healing of a leper. No large task at hand, one would think for the Son of God, however this healing has some peculiar aspects Matthew very clearly includes.

This leper obviously could not have known much of Jesus. In first century Judea he would have been required to stay at least 12 feet or so from anyone else, and would have had to announce his comings and goings by proclaiming himself "Unclean". It is unlikely he was permitted to sit with the throng as they were taught, and so it was *he* who came to Jesus, Matthew reports.

Now this really has to be put into context. This leper, such as he was would have evoked the contempt, revulsion,

derision, and fear of everyone close by. In fact, we can conclude that this encounter was nowhere but outside. Had this event occurred inside a dwelling, pandemonium would have erupted, people would be fleeing, everything in the house would be put out to burn, if not the structure itself. And this poor leper makes a statement, "If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean." It is important to note here, that he does not ask about Jesus ability, only his willingness.

The loving Jesus we have known all our lives confirms this statement, And This Is Important: By putting forth his hand, and touching the leper, and then, and only then saying, "I will, be thou clean."

Now if being too close to this man was horrifyingly dangerous, and societally unacceptable, how much more was touching him? And why in the first place was Jesus touching him? After all he's the Son of God, he need merely think it, even the leper seems to know this. And so, Our Lord tells our leper to show himself to the priests. And tells him to offer the appropriate sacrifice of two birds, underscoring the authority of His Ministry, and at the same time confirming the words he just spoke as He taught in chapter 5, "I am come not to destroy the Law, but to fulfill." Christ has also

underscored the fact that in addition to being a loving healer, he's a bit of a rule breaker, but we'll get back to that.

Down in Capernaum, Matthew tells us of a Centurion who approaches Christ in need of healing for his servant. Now Luke also reports this event and that this is no ordinary centurion. Luke reports that this Centurion "loveth our nation and hath built us a synagogue." The fact that he seeks help for a mere servant would seem to corroborate this entirely, as he makes his statement, just as the leper had, "Lord my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented." At these words our Lord turns to come with him, only to be met with the words we say at Communion, "Lord, I am not worthy...but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed" the Centurion then goes on to explain that he understands the pressures of authority, and the need to just get things done, "For I say unto this man, Go, and He goeth; and to another, Come and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it." Just as the leper, this Centurion approached our Lord for help. Just as the leper, the Centurion did not question our Lord's ability. Our Lord merely speaks his healing, "go thy way, and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee."

These two miracles of healing have some remarkable differences and some very telling similarities. Whereas Christ need not have lifted a finger to heal the leper, he did so; and he did it in front of a throng who were probably horrified; as much by the act of touching, as by the breaking of accepted societal laws and norms. In the case of the Centurion's servant, where it would seem normal to have gone with the Centurion, Christ again must have shocked the crowd by breaking "rules". After all, everybody knows you can't fix things without laying a hand on them, the world doesn't work that way; and yet Jesus does.

These two very different healing miracles right after the Sermon on the

Mount tell us a lot about the Jesus we have known all our lives and our own personal Christian ministry and mission, and so to do these two men.

The leper, a social outcast and pariah recognized the loving, healing Jesus. He had no doubt of Christ's ability. And so to did the Centurion. He approached Jesus and simply laid a statement of fact at His feet. He recognized the healing, loving, and Miraculous Jesus. Not only that but by describing the hierarchical doings of his daily life, and then deferring to Christ's word alone, he has acknowledged the Christ as his superior, at least, if not ruler.

We have two thousand years of hindsight, the lives, missions and miracles of the Apostles, the learned studies of great theologians and yet at times we have trouble, recognizing Christ's hand at work in this earthly pilgrimage. Christ shows us through these miracles a pattern for us to assist him as his followers and missionaries.

Jesus' gives his healing love fully that day, and everyday. He didn't care for social convention or for man's ill conceived notions of how the world operates, he gave unconditionally and without hesitation.

In our earthly missions for Christ we must seek to imitate (as St. Aquinas would say) these actions. When confronted with those in need of our Charity, that is, our love, we must endeavor to give it, and reach out a loving hand, even perhaps if it breaks our own "rules". And when confronted by one seeking aid for another we must demonstrate the faith of Centurion through prayer to our Lord. It is in this way that our hands, by God's Grace, can drive away darkness, and weeping, and even gnashing of teeth.

You see whether you hold out your hand to aid another, or lift your hands in prayer for them, we demonstrate that the power of God to make change in this world is only an arms length away. *Amen*