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## Introduction

Leprosy was a disease with a social stigma: as one might find of psychotic illnesses today; or Aids in the 1980s; or TB at the turn of 1900; or syphilis in the Victorian era. An illness that made people talk, that divided families, that brought shame. However, the conflict in this story is not around the stigma or social shame of the disease these ten lepers were suffering. It is a much more complex social interaction which brings conflict into the story, that of cultural and religious difference, generosity and thanks.

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## Text

Luke 17:11–19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

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## Comment

It would be hard to be more topical in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland today than to discuss the acceptance of the foreigner and the lack of gratitude of the natives. But it is probably also too easy simply to bundle this conflict of the ten lepers up in that guise. There’s all sorts of strange detail in this story which we might benefit from teasing out as we try to understand the complex relationships at play.

Jesus is in a border-land, he is travelling to Jerusalem by going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. The story begins with tension and risk, a tension every listener would have instinctively understood and a risk they all lived with.

As Jesus entered a village ten lepers hesitantly approached him and kept their distance. It isn't clear if that is normal or not. When I was in India, in 1991, I remember a leper going round the tables of a restaurant veranda with the blessing of the owner, and being offered food and money at the tables by the diners. I remember the intimacy, the smell, the need to be polite, as the other diners were being polite. As I gave him money, I felt a natural relief when he moved away. Simply being a leper did not always denote keeping a distance, though the disease was infectious it took some time to pass from one person to another. The very visual and physical nature of this disease does make close encounters memorable.

However, these ten had an additional reason for staying apart... they were a mixed group in terms of their cultural and religious background. Perhaps this was apparent by their clothes or their accents, the story does not explain because the shared knowledge of the hearers was sufficient that an explanation wouldn't be necessary. Just as in the small town on the West of Scotland where I grew up jokes were often told that involved a catholic and a protestant, we never needed it explained that this crossed the divide of a conflict in our community, the premise of the joke was a shared knowledge of a cultural difference. In this story, there is an additional nationality difference, and that difference was kept within the group of ten who shared this infectious and incurable disease.

Jesus does not sort them. He does not call out the one who was different, in this case the single Samaritan, but heals them all.

So why is it that the Samaritan comes back? Why is he alone so moved to thank Jesus? All ten have been healed. But only one has been both healed and accepted. The power of acceptance in conflict resolution must never be underestimated. This is the love Jesus offered the leper who was different, this is the sheer joy of acceptance that brought him back, the only foreigner, to say thank you.

In his poem 'Assisi', Norman Mccaig remembers an encounter with a leper outside the church of St Francis and contrasts the voice thanking the pilgrims going by with the birds which which St Francis is so closely associated. The gratitude in this poem speaks not of healing but of gifts of money, a strong contrast with the story we are reading today, where the freedom found in Christ is the reason for the grateful return of the Samaritan.

The gratitude overwhelms the story, the question Jesus asks of the crowd of faithful pilgrims around him is a challenge to their preconceptions and yet one is left to draw the conclusion that they did not understand his acceptance of the Samaritan for what it was. None answer his questions, instead Jesus is again the next person to speak as he touches the heart of the Samaritan with his understanding of the faith, and gives him permission to go. The freedom to leave in this context is not banishment, but liberation.

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## Response

Can you think of a memorable time when you have been truly accepted for who you are? Was it a surprise? Or a reconciliation? Was it repeated or a one-off? Try to think about how that acceptance was shown to you and replicate it with someone this coming week.

OR

In our society today we have many vulnerable groups whose religion or cultural heritage makes them different and potentially targets of prejudice or bigotry. We also still have illnesses, such as mental illness, addiction, or sexually transmitted diseases, which carry shame. How do we offer acceptance to people who are different from ourselves with equality and dignity, as Jesus did?

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## Prayer

Jesus take me as I am  
I can come no other way

We pray for acceptance, sometimes glibly because our hymns have become clichés, sometimes lazily because we are wanting to be included but don't really want the effort of Jesus' road through the border land. This day, god of all peoples, we pray you will forgive us our moments of non-acceptance and enable us to truly see and understand the damage that our lack of acceptance may do.

Yet the acceptance You offer is neither glib nor lazy. Give us the same radical sight, that you showed on the road to Jerusalem, to see others fully, and accept others wholly.

Let us be bold and brave in the border-land, and embrace the consequences of accepting all.

AMEN