

Matthew 21:42-44 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes?"

⁴³ "Therefore, I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on whom it falls will be crushed."

Mark 1: 40-44 A man with leprosy^[a] came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

⁴¹ Jesus was indignant.^[b] He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" ⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

⁴³ Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: ⁴⁴ "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

John 12:1-8 Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³ Then Mary took about a pint^[a] of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

⁴ But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵ "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.^[b]" ⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

⁷ "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸ You will always have the poor among you,^[c] but you will not always have me."

The original church of St James was founded in the 12th Century. As the port of Dunwich expanded in size and importance it became the most important trading port on the East Anglian coast, with connections across Europe and beyond. With those connections came something less welcome — leprosy. 800 years ago a leper hospital was built here — on the outskirts of the city of Dunwich, to care for leprosy sufferers, but also to keep them at a distance from the rest of the city. The church became the chapel to the hospital, and their beds were so arranged in the hospital that they could see into the chapel and witness worship — even if they could not understand the Latin mass. There was connection, but at arms length.

The chapel itself remains while the hospital has gone, and it is an irony that while the city of Dunwich has been taken by the sea the leper hospital chapel has survived it all, even though it was always a chapel on the margins.

If you look at the stones of the chapel you will find the wall comprises stones from all across Europe, far and wide. What an extraordinary thing — this little East Suffolk chapel has international walls! That is because good stone for building is hard to come by in Suffolk. So the chapel walls incorporate what good stone could be found — the ballast from ships that was cast out on the beach at Dunwich. The chapel is an accidental record of Dunwich's trading links from 900 years ago.

But there's something else you could say about these stones — they have been twice rejected, and then valued. Wherever they came from they were rejected once — they were worth no more than to be ballast in the bottom of a ship. And then they were rejected a second time: thrown out onto the beach as a cargo of goods replaced it. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes!

The chapel is build of rejected stone, for worship of the rejected Son of God, by society's rejects — leprosy sufferers. I think there is something deeply meaningful in this multiple marginalisation that the chapel represents.

As you will be aware, I've picked three gospel readings today. The third is the set gospel for today, while the first two I picked because of this idea of the rejected stones, and Jesus's attitude towards lepers. So, in the reading from Mark there are two things I'd like you to notice.

Firstly, a man with leprosy comes to Jesus and begs on his knees: 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Depending on the translation, we are told that Jesus was indignant, or he 'was moved with pity'. The Greek is starker. He was angry. *Angry*. Why was he angry? The action that follows immediately after tells us clearly that Jesus is not angry with the man — he doesn't rebuke him. He is angry *for* the man. He is angry that he has to suffer the fear, loneliness, exclusion from society and the ravages of the disease itself. Think about that. Jesus's reaction to leprosy and that man's condition is anger *for the man*.

The second thing to notice is the order of what happens next. He reached out his hand and touched him... And *then* he said, 'Be clean!'

The touch of connection happens before the word of healing. The holy touches the unclean, and then, immediately as Jesus says it, the man becomes clean. The welcome back into society, which is to say the healing of his social exile, comes before his physical exile.

Judaism has its rituals of cleanness and uncleanness, but the truth is that we all have reactions towards cleanness and uncleanness. We have a very strong sense of disgust towards certain things. Anything that comes out of a body (particularly someone else's body) is disgusting to us — wee and poo, spit, blood, pus. It feels bad enough saying that in one sentence. The thought of touching someone contagious feels alarming or disgusting too. This extends to people who just smell bad — and that's probably because of the association with illness or the risk of contamination or contagion. Things that remind us that we are mortal animals also tend to disgust us. Dead bodies. But we are complex creatures, and this level of disgust can attach to people for moral and social reasons too. I reckon if you were face to face with a rapist you would think twice about any kind of contact — this is moral disgust. And we can have disgust for certain kinds of people too — I reckon Jonah's dislike of going to Nineveh is on the level of disgust for the Assyrians. John's story of Mary anointing Jesus is told in all the gospels but in different forms. Luke's version has the woman anointing Jesus to be of ill-repute, and the pharisee who is hosting Jesus thinks she shouldn't be touching him at all.

This is not a problem that has just gone away. These disgust reflexes that I'm talking about continue to show themselves in a wariness or avoidance of people with mental illness, with those who look or smell sick, and for some people its an avoidance of people in the LGBTQIA+ category. Actually, we can encounter it everywhere.

I suspect this is something that you will immediately think, 'well I'm not like that'. But if you think about it later, you may admit that you *are*, still a bit like that about some kinds of people. You are not alone. If this is the case, and you recognise that your welcome and your compassion is compromised to some people, or people in some situations, what do we do? I'd like to suggest three things:

1. read more of the New Testament and see that Jesus very deliberately met promiscuous samaritan women, he lunched with tax-collectors, he touched leprosy sufferers, he respected children. And this is our cue to do likewise.
2. Pray more. prayer done right is an act of compassion. Prayer done right is not thinking about what I want, but about what God wants, and what people in need may want. It is a daily practice of seeing the world through God's loving eyes.

3. Remember that it is our job to love. Nurses aren't immune to disgust. Their compassion overrides their aversion to get close to those in need. Practice compassion.

And there is something I suggest we avoid, too. There is a wonderful novel by the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig called *Beware of Pity*. And at the heart of this novel is this fantastic piece of wisdom:

"There are two kinds of pity. One, the weak and sentimental kind, which is really no more than the heart's impatience to be rid as quickly as possible of the painful emotion aroused by the sight of another's unhappiness, that pity which is not compassion, but only an instinctive desire to fortify one's own soul against the sufferings of another; and the other, the only one at counts, the unsentimental but creative kind, which knows what it is about and is determined to hold out, in patience and forbearance, to the very limit of its strength and even beyond."

Let me illustrate that. I gave a donation to the DEC this week in aid of the Myanmar appeal. They need help, I did my bit. Now I can make a donation in order to salve my conscience — there is terrible need, but now I have helped. Move on. That might be the 'heart's impatience to be rid as quickly as possible of the painful emotion aroused by the sight of another's unhappiness.' Or, I can make the donation, but remember to pray for Myanmar, and to seek news updates on Myanmar. I can allow myself to be emotionally involved with the ongoing story of Myanmar. That latter action — even though this is taking place half way across the globe — is more like true compassion. The same may be true for our actions closer to home. Christlike compassion is not 'getting rid of the problem' like it's an inconvenience to us, it is entering into the problem so that it is a support for them. This is hard. God is preaching to me as well as to you.

Let me conclude. I started by observing that the chapel just outside was built out of rejected stones on the margins of a city, and it served rejected people in the name of the rejected Son of God. I observed that Jesus did not reject the outcasts, but he was angry on their behalf, and acted with compassion and healing, and that this is our job too. I observed that our actions can often be controlled by aspects of disgust — physical, moral and social, but compassion, shaped by Christ, enables us to overcome that and love the rejected.

The church is built of oddballs, misfits and outcasts and we are to love the oddballs, misfits and outcasts. We are never too respectable for that. Because the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes!

Amen.