

Lepers

Jesus was popular. Great crowds flocked to hear him. They brought to him their sick and frail and he healed them. But some people got cross with him – very cross indeed. Why?

Well there were many reasons but they all boiled down to one thing. Jesus didn't seem to share their priorities. He sat lightly to the rules and regulations by which the authorities expected people to lead their lives. He carried out his healing activities without regard to the Sabbath, a treasured national institution. What ultimately led to his downfall was his willingness to confront critically another treasured national institution – the temple.

But he was also prepared to cross boundaries in the way he dealt with ordinary people. He was at ease in the company of the thought-police of his day, the Pharisees, but he also sought out the friendship of the very people whom the Pharisees most despised: for example, 'tax collectors', who made their money by inflating tax dues and creaming off the excess for their own gain.

Some of the most startling stories about Jesus concern the way he dealt with a particular group of people: lepers. We're far from certain what was the true nature of the condition referred to as 'leprosy', but we are reasonably sure that the major public concern about it was not medical at all. Because it formed a visible blemish on the person, it was interpreted as a sign of God's disfavour, God's anger. There must have been something in their past so awful as to attract God's judgement. So those afflicted were treated as outcasts. They were shunned. No-one would go near them; no-one would associate with them in any way. They could not work; they had to subsist by begging. Normal social contacts were forbidden.

Now here's the rub. Whether or not the actual medical condition was clinically serious or contagious, the attendant social status was contagious. This was the primary reason that lepers were treated like dirt. It would have been bad enough to catch the disfiguring disease; to attract the social stigma would have been even worse. Anyone seen with a leper would have been suspect; anyone actually touching a leper would himself or herself bear the taint of social exclusion. No wonder lepers were treated as outcasts.

But that is exactly what Jesus did. He touched the leper!

He crossed the boundary to reach someone that everyone else surrounded with an invisible but impenetrable fence.

He found a way for this person to get back into society.

That is the way of our master, Christ. Real though they were, the social forces that shut the leper out were not, by Jesus, regarded as insuperable. Jesus saw in the lepers, as he did in the person of the condemned prostitute, someone barred from his or her place in God's kingdom. And central to Jesus' mission was the

proclamation of God's kingdom as a banquet in which even the bewildered passer-by on the street would be welcomed – no, compelled! – to come in.

For Jesus there were no opinion polls, no focus groups. He did not sound out popular opinion. He was a leader. We are called to follow. Are we up for it?