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Essay 6

**Jesus, community compassion  
and HIV prevention**

Robin Gill

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## Essay 6

# **Jesus, community compassion and HIV prevention**

Robin Gill

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### **1. Health, healing and the Gospels**

Over the last few years I have found the healing stories in the Gospels particularly important in thinking about health care today. They help to point to values and depths that are sometimes overlooked in everyday life. In these stories Jesus shows levels of compassion, care, faith and humility that can, I believe, still inform those working alongside people in need.

Consider, for example, this story recounted in the first chapter of Mark.

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean'. Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!'. Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them'. But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter. (Mark 1:40-45)

It was a 'leper' who came to Jesus. Except, of course, he almost certainly was not a 'leper' in any medical sense. *Sara'at* in the Jewish Bible or *lepra* in the New Testament are not simply to be identified with the bacterial infection Hansen's disease, or *elephantiasis graecorum* (which is how leprosy would be identified today).<sup>1</sup> None of the crucial features of Hansen's disease (anaesthetic areas of the skin, painless and progressive ulceration of the extremities, and facial nodules) are ever mentioned in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Rather the person who came to Jesus had already been stigmatised by his community as being a 'leper', as someone who should be segregated from the community as being profoundly 'impure'.

This 'leper' came to Jesus 'begging' him and (according to some texts) 'kneeling'. Jesus in response was 'moved with pity/compassion' (some texts have 'anger'). In Mark, unlike the other Gospels, Jesus was again moved with compassion by the sight of the 5000 and then the 4000 lacking food. Compassion (or even anger) here is not just empathy, placing yourself in the position of another, but identifying someone in real need, 'suffering alongside' him and being determined to help him if you possibly can. Compassion is both passionate and focused upon help. It was, after all, the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable who was also moved with compassion (Luke 10:33), going to some lengths to help the man stripped and beaten by robbers on the road to Jericho.

Then Jesus 'stretched out his hand and touched' the 'leper', showing astonishing disregard for the impurity consequences involved.<sup>3</sup> In this he was quite unlike Elisha, who stayed in his house, kept a distance from Naaman the 'leper' outside and gave his command through a messenger.<sup>4</sup> Compassionate care indeed!

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1959, p. 186); W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr, *A Critical Commentary on The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. II (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991, pp. 10-11); Martin Noth, *Leviticus* (London: SCM Press, 1965, p. 106); and Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> S.G. Browne, *Leprosy in the Bible* (London: Christian Medical Fellowship, 1970), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> James D.G. Dunn, 'Jesus and Purity: An Ongoing Debate', *New Testament Studies*, 48, 2002, p. 461.

<sup>4</sup> See my 'AIDS, Leprosy and the Synoptic Jesus', in ed. Robin Gill *Reflecting Theologically on AIDS: A Global Challenge* (London and Geneva: SCM Press and UNAIDS, 2007), p.110.

In the parallel healing story of the ten lepers, told only in Luke, Jesus used a phrase repeated in other healing stories: 'your faith has made you well'. (Luke 17:19) If compassion and care occur frequently in healing stories then so does faith, sometimes in the sense of 'trust' (particularly trust that Jesus can indeed heal) and other times nearer to 'belief'; and usually the faith of the person to be healed but occasionally the faith of others. Faith in some sense can even be a requirement of healing or, at least, its absence can be an explanation of why healing was not possible. (Mark 6:6)

Characteristically the story of the single 'leper' also involves restraint and humility, or rather a lack of restraint on the part of the one who was healed. Jesus sternly warned him, as he warned others:

'See that you say nothing to anyone'...but he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly.

Compassion, care, faith and humility run deeply through the healing stories and have much to teach us about good health care.<sup>5</sup> In addition, like many others, I have come to see strong affinities between the way 'lepers' in the Bible were stigmatized by their local community, but emphatically not by Jesus, and the way that those living with HIV are too often stigmatized today. Of course Hansen's disease and HIV are medically quite different from each other. But at the level of community misperceptions and stigmatization they have much in common. The followers of Jesus manifestly must respond to people living with HIV as Jesus responded to those perceived to be 'lepers', that is, with compassion, care, faith and humility.

## **2. Community compassion versus community cohesion**

All of this I simply assume here. But there is more to be discovered in this story from Mark about *community* compassion. This is after

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<sup>5</sup> See further my *Health Care and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

all a story that exemplifies a central tension within contextual theology. In it, the norms of the local community are simultaneously both challenged and affirmed. The complex requirements of Jewish purity laws are both broken and sustained in a single story. For those biblical scholars who see Jesus as one who overturns Jewish laws, the touching of the impure 'leper' confirms a pattern displayed in Jesus' table fellowship with sinners, breaking the Sabbath and being touched by the woman made impure from menstrual blood. However, for those who see Jesus as a generally observant Jew, there is his command to 'show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded' as is required in Leviticus 13 and 14. Confusingly the story can be read either way.<sup>6</sup>

My own suggestion is to see this as a story that upholds community norms when they do not conflict with the demands of compassion, that is to say the demands of the Kingdom of God, but to challenge them when they do. Such compassion even takes precedence over strongly held and principled scruples. So Jesus upholds the formal requirements of Leviticus 13 and 14 yet, as a healer 'moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched' the 'leper'. The formal requirements of the local community were sustained but the personal practice was quite different.

This pattern is shown even more clearly in the following story, this time from Luke:

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment'. When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to

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<sup>6</sup> James D.G. Dunn, 'Jesus and Purity: An Ongoing Debate', *New Testament Studies*, 48, 2002, pp. 49-467.

be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day'. But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?'. When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. (Luke 13:10-17)

Viewed from the synagogue community's perspective, its leader was obviously correct: 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day'. The woman had been crippled for eighteen years. One more day after all those years would have mattered little in the interests of keeping communal norms about the Sabbath.

Jesus' response was astonishingly sharp: 'You hypocrites!'

In the Synoptic Gospels the charge of hypocrisy is frequently made by Jesus (13 times in Matthew) and is characteristically levelled at the religiously observant and their leaders. In this story the religious leader and his congregation are denounced as hypocrites, as 'actors' who say one thing but do another.<sup>7</sup> Or, to express this in terms of pastoral theology, they break the relationship between faith and practice. They claim the high ground of religious faith but in the process ignore the accompanying requirements of compassionate practice.

### **3. Compassion, truth and shame**

In the context of HIV, hypocrisy by community leaders has been only too evident. Perhaps it is the hypocrisy of leaders hiding information about prevalence, denying the link between HIV and AIDS, or claiming that HIV only affects the gay community. Or perhaps, and most shocking among religious leaders, it is the denial that their own community and pastors are themselves living with HIV. Communal fidelity and

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<sup>7</sup> See C.F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (London and Philadelphia: SCM Press and Trinity Press, 1990), p. 338.

truth-telling are key components in HIV prevention, yet the record of churches has all too often been riddled with hypocrisy.

If Jesus responded to the vulnerable with compassion, care, faith and humility, he responded to those religious people who ignored their plight with a sharp denunciation of hypocrisy. And ‘when he said this, all his opponents were put to shame’.

The issue of ‘shame’ is especially sensitive in the context of HIV. ‘Stigmatization’ and ‘shame’ are closely connected, but they are not always identical. People have a deplorable tendency to stigmatize others, but they can properly feel shame about this tendency and thus about their own behaviour. All too often communities, even Church communities, have seen fit to stigmatize those living with HIV. Stigmatizing (and even shaming) people who cannot undo their condition is particularly cruel and deeply harmful. Those with disabilities have all too often been stigmatized in this way. The history of ‘leprosy’ demonstrates this all too clearly. Emphatically Jesus did not do that to the woman in this story. Yet he did ‘put to shame’ the community that had failed to show her compassion.

Perhaps communities that stigmatize those living with HIV, or that condone predatory male sexual behaviour that helps to spread HIV, can appropriately be shamed. This does appear to be possible in the third story, from John:

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’. They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her’. And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning

with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?'. She said, 'No one, sir'. And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again'. (John 8:2-11).

It is generally recognized that this is indeed an ancient story about Jesus but that it did not originally form a part of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>8</sup> In the context of understanding compassion it is particularly important although it requires sensitive interpretation.

Once again it is the religiously observant who take the moral high ground but are finally put to shame by Jesus. This time they are not defending the Sabbath. They have found a woman who has apparently flouted sexual norms: 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery'. Like many religious communities today, it is sexual activity that is identified as being especially sinful.

In the story Jesus does not deny the role of sin. The woman herself is finally told 'from now on do not sin again'; whatever she has done is not condoned. Yet she is explicitly not condemned by Jesus and everyone else is reminded that they are not 'without sin'. She is not stigmatized as an 'adulterer', but the religious community is apparently shamed, going away 'one by one, beginning with the elders'. They have been challenged by Jesus in public and, as a direct result, put to shame.

In conclusion, taken together, these three stories suggest that Jesus was prepared both to affirm and to challenge religious communities. In them he affirmed communal practices when they did not conflict with the demands of communal compassion, but challenged them sharply when they did. The virtues identified at an individual level in the healing stories (compassion, care, faith and humility) are supplemented at a community level with sharp challenges, or even denunciations.

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<sup>8</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1967), pp. 490-3.

In the context of HIV, even Church communities sadly can act badly. If we are to become genuinely compassionate, as Jesus still requires us to be, and indeed if we are to become effective agents in HIV prevention, we still need to be challenged sharply. Fidelity, truth-telling and, above all, compassion should properly be marks of the Church.