

It was early in the morning, and the mist of dawn had not yet blown out of the hollows. Dew hung in the spiders' webs from the branches closest to the trunks of the trees. It was a sheltered place we slept that night, and the earth had a little softness from the way the wind cornered the blown leaves into that spot. We always rose early, in case we were chased away. Being chased was just a part of life.

"Not here! Go away!" was what nice people said.

"Out of here or I'll set the dogs on you!" was not uncommon.

"Scum! Take your filth somewhere else!" That really hurt.

"Get out of here! You're not fit for this earth! Nor the next! Get away from here and die!" That was the worst.

So we went away before we were seen. Gathering scraps of food, un-harvested fruit or grain, left-overs and garbage. It was too easy to be recognized anywhere near anyone's home. But the risk sometimes paid off if a soft-hearted father or brother, sister or mother could be called to. They might bring out good food, and some clean clothes and a blanket if you were lucky. But the neighbours would as likely send a handful of stones after you and you knew your family would pay for it for weeks to come.

What lay ahead for us? What did we look forward to? Honestly, we all hoped we would just die quickly. The slow deaths were the worst, watching a friend just rot away. Dirt got in where the skin broke and sores followed. Sores would grow and then the yellow puss would come, and the stench. Then you watched someone just rot away, like old meat or a dead cow.

We still prayed. We prayed to God even though they said we were wasting our time. "God doesn't deal with filth like you!" And why would he? Infected, unclean, cast out, impure, unlucky, bad and evil. That is what you are when you are a leper. But we all, each of us, had grown up in Synagogue. All bar mitzvah'd, all welcomed once, all told we were God's own and chosen by him.

Healers there were, from time to time. They toured the towns and villages healing for a few coins in the hat. None ever cured a leper. There were the Bible stories of the holy men of old who could cure you, but they were long dead and turned to dust. But we heard of this Jesus. Jesus had touched the untouchables, eaten with the sinful, befriended the low-lives and had healed like no one in memory. More than that, people said he wasn't stuck-up. He wasn't a "holy-holy" type. Just simple, plain spoken, kind and good.

"He won't last long!" Arran laughed when I told him. "The good never last long." he said.

"I wonder if he'll give me a new nose too?" said Pete. Sniffy Pete we called him.

"They do it with creams and powders," said Maggy. "It looks like you're healed until you wash it off" Maggy and Saphia were the women in our group. Men and women don't mix generally, but when you've only got lepers to hang around with, who you are and what you are doesn't matter so much, and you're safer in a group.

But I thought, "If he is alright, then maybe, like the old prophets, he heals because God is with him. You know, not next to him like an invisible friend, but sort of inside him, in his head and his soul. I used to think I could be like that. I was close to God once. Then I got sick and they threw me out and spat on me and said I was wicked inside. So I suppose I didn't have God in me. But maybe this Jesus bar Joseph does."

Everyone agreed it was worth a try. Arran and Rikki had been scrounging around the back of the pub in the village and they heard he was coming through on his way to Jerusalem. We worked out if we stood up high on the bank above the road, and only came out at the last minute, we could shout to him before they threw rocks at us. We could maybe get his attention. If you're begging and you get their attention they're much more likely to give you something, you see.

So we were lying low, like fighters waiting to ambush. Half nervous, half playful, half frightened, half hoping, half daring to hope.....hope we could be healed...made better.

"Better", "Healed" Words you cannot understand until you've had what we have. It's not just being sick, losing the sense of feeling in your leg or foot. It's not just knowing that eventually you will get poison in your blood and die on a ditch with no one to bury you. It's not just the horror of seeing fingers and toes and ears and such rot away. What you long for, you pray for and try to pretend you don't care about is love. You want to be loved. Your Mum and Dad can't love you. It's against the laws. No one can hug you. No one can kiss you. No one can comfort you, care for you and bring you water or a blessing. We could do that for each other, but we are all lost souls. The

people you grew up with, neighbours, friends, wives, husbands, children. They are forever lost to you. There can be no more love.

“Healed” means welcomed back. It means you can return. A priest has to inspect you, look at you, prod you, cut you and see if you bleed right, and stop bleeding right. And if he says you’re alright, he writes you a paper, and that is your proof, then you can come home. You can pray again. God welcomes you back, into the Temple even! You can walk in a crowd again. You can eat food with others around a table on Sabbath eve. You can clink glasses of rich warm wine with the kids you went to school with, and have their kids sit on your knee and pull your nose like they used to.

Along the road it was warming up. The dust was in the air from the people walking. We could hear them coming as we lay in wait. “Now” said Saphia, and up we jumped. We all started to shout out “Jesus! Hey Jeeesus! Have mercy on us. On us.” He looked up! He looked at us! I felt my heart move into somewhere near my tonsils. I could hardly shout.

“Jesus, please, heal us. Let us go, please.” I whispered as he looked at me.

There was a pause, a still moment, like when the wind turns. “Go” he said, “Go and show your selves to the priest.” Well, that was code for “Get an XRay, order a CatScan, Get a clean bill of health.” Good enough for us! We span on our heals and took off for the village down in the valley where the fat old priest lived. He never walked more than 40 paces from his kitchen table. He was our man, we reckoned.

But suddenly Pete stopped. I slowed to see what was what. He sniffed but it sounded wrong. He had his hand on his face. “Look!” he said. He moved his hand away and there was a nose. It was ugly, but it was a nose. No doubt. Then he looked at his hands, and I looked at mine. Leprosy hands, like we had, were dry and papery. Or worse, wet and running sore. But ours had skin on, smooth and flexy, like real skin. Sniffy Pete turned and took off. He ran, and I ran after him. We crested the rise above the road less then 2 minutes after Jesus spoke to us. He was still there, like he was waiting. I paused at the top but Pete didn’t. He went down that hill like a wild man and he ran straight for Jesus. He was waving his arms like a helicopter and screaming “God is good, God is Good!” He didn’t slow down and I thought he was going to barrel into poor Jesus and flatten the man, but he fell to his knees at full speed and slid into him like a batter reaching for first base. He just said “Thank you! Thank you Jesus!” Over and over until Jesus put his hand on him and said, “OK! It’s OK now. You’re OK now. You are healed. It is your faith that has made you well. You can go home now.”

Then he looked up at me, and he said, “Were not all the rest of you healed? Where is everyone else? Why didn’t you all come and thank God?”

I stood there. I was tongue-tied. I didn’t know what to say. I wish I had said, “Thank you.” right then. But I didn’t. I was thankful. I just hadn’t let the “Thank you” surface, sort of find its way out. It was like I had seen I was healed but it hadn’t sunk in. Not into my heart. Your heart is where real thank-yous come from. My heart was numb, or in shock. I don’t know. I missed the moment. I really missed my moment.

Pete, I often have thought about this, Pete seemed to know what he thought as well as what he felt. His heart and his head were joined somehow. Mine have a wall of pillows between them I think. Pete had believed, I think as soon as we heard of Jesus, that he could heal us. So he thought with his head, and wondered if healing would include a new nose. We thought it was a joke, but Pete was a bit deep. He joined up the dots, as it were. He pondered. A great ponderer was our Pete. What he heard, or saw, tied in with what he thought, and that touched off on what he felt, and that was roped onto what he held true in his heart. He was the one that used to say, “He loves us, you know. God, eh? He loves us. No matter what they say. I feel it in my heart.”

Pete went home, God bless him! That’s where he is now. I felt I had to catch up somehow. So I shuffled down the slope as the whole crowd set off again. I sidled up to Jesus when no one was near and said, “Look, I’m sorry. I should have said Thank you too, but it takes me a while and I often miss stuff.” “Alright.” he said. “So,” I said, “would it be OK if I came along with you a bit. Until I get it in my head, like Pete has it? So I have the words?” He didn’t even look at me. He just swung his hand around and whumped me in the chest and said “It’s *here* you have to get it, you dinkum! Yes, you can stay with me, as long as you like.”

They ended up calling me Barnabas. It means “son of the father”, because I decided I would always notice when I needed to say thank you to God my father. “Thank you Father” I used to say, and still do, a lot. Even for small things I always wanted to stay up to date on my thank-yous. My head and my heart are closer, but it’s working on the thank-yous that does it. You should try...