

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

When justice and peace embrace

Presented by David Kerr

Introduction

Good morning. Let me introduce myself. My name is Benjamin. You can call me Ben though ... most of my friends do. I remember when I didn't have any friends. I was a leper. My days were numbered. I lived in the time when Jesus walked the earth. Things were pretty rough for lepers then.

Not like now. If a doctor finds leprosy in someone today, early enough, a tablet or two soon fixes the problem. But there're some people in Sydney, and in various parts of the world, that have diseases like leprosy. They have a pretty rough time. They feel just like I did before Jesus healed me. Do you want to hear my story?

If you do, you're taking a risk, because you may understand what it's like to be a leper in the 21st century and God may ask you to do something about people like me. I think you might find some surprises in what I'll say.

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My name is Ben; I was a leper who lived when Jesus walked on the earth. Would you like to hear my story? Really? Forgive me for pressing the question. "Many people, including Christians, only humour me by saying yes. I sense my story makes them uncomfortable.... They switch off half way through and it seems they don't really want to hear. If you want to hear, I'll tell you.

Being a leper was probably one of the worst things that could happen to you. The disease slowly eats away at your body. Have you ever seen a very, very old white statue that's been exposed to the weather for years? Parts of the body have crumbled ... maybe the hands and feet. That's what it's like.

It's like a white cancer that corrodes the body slowly. There's always a stench from the decaying skin. A leper has no hope of being healed. There's no cure. I had no feeling in my limbs. I often used to cut or burn my feet and hands, and I wouldn't feel the pain.

One of the terrible things of being a leper is that you're an outcast. I was banished from my family, the community where I worked and my friends who I relaxed and had fun with. Even my church, the synagogue, excluded me.

I'm not allowed to go inside any city that has walls around it. I lived with other lepers outside the city beside the garbage dump where we could live off the remains of food scraps!

Probably the worst part of being a leper is the way the religious leaders treated me. The Rabbis

decreed that no one could come within two metres of a leper. If a wind was blowing from a leper's direction, 100 metres would be too close. If I touched a plate or put my head on a stone to rest, it was

pronounced “unclean”. No one could say “g’day” to me. I had to cry “unclean” not only to warn people to avoid me, but so they would “pray for me”.

This is the hardest part to talk about. It’s so unfair. It was believed by the religious leaders that leprosy or any sickness was due to that person’s sin or the sin of his parents or grandparents. “That’s not always true”, said Jesus. What a relief it was to hear him say that! (I nearly dislocated my thigh jumping for joy!) I tell you, to have this deadly disease and to hear that I’m to blame was the last straw.

Did I hear you say times have changed? Yes, they have for lepers in your country and other parts of the developed world. You’re probably not aware of it and may be embarrassed when I tell you, that many of you treat people **today** just like I was treated.

Who are the “untouchables” in your society? People who are HIV positive, drug addicts, drunks, prostitutes, the homeless, the poor, the unemployed, blacks, even the disabled. These are your untouchables. What is it that causes you to pull back? What is it that makes you explain away your involvement in helping your “untouchables”?

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My name is Ben, and I’m telling my story to those who want to hear it. I lived in the time when Jesus was on earth and I felt sad, isolated and angry because of the way I was treated as a leper by the community and religious leaders of that time.

Then something happened to change all that. I met Jesus. Wow - what a feeling! Do you know what He did? Something that no one has done for years, ever since I had that rotten disease ... He touched me.

If you’ve just tuned in, my name is Ben. I’m a leper Jesus healed when he was here on earth. I’m concerned about some people who are close friends of mine, because they’re treated the same way as I was before Jesus healed me ... “untouchable”. People who are HIV” positive, the prostitutes, the homeless - the poor.

What stops you doing something? Is it because you don’t want to see people like me? Out of sight - out of mind? That reminds me of one of your poems, called *Faces in the Street*.

They lie / the men who tell us for reasons of their own ...
That want is here a stranger / and that misery’s unknown;
For where the nearest suburb / and the city proper meet ...
My window-sill is level with the faces in the street ..

Drifting past / drifting past,
To the beat of weary feet,
While I sorrow, for the owners of those faces in the street.

And cause I have, to sorrow in a land so young and fair. ..
To see upon those faces / stamped the marks, of want and care,
I look in vain / for traces of the fresh and fair... and sweet...
In sallow sunken faces that are drifting through the street.
Drifting on / drifting on ...
To the scrape of restless feet;
I can sorrow, for the owners of the faces in the street.

I wonder – would the apathy of wealthy men endure...
Were all their windows level / with the faces of the poor?

Ah! Mammon's slaves! Your knees shall knock, your hearts in terror beat...
When God demands a reason for the sorrows of the street.

You think it's bad when your husband or wife or family or friends don't hug or kiss you because you've got the 'flu. That might last for a week or two ... He touched me after years and years ... someone clean touched me.

I'm not sure whether you realise it or not, but Jesus took a big risk in touching me. He broke the teaching of the rabbis. He risked becoming contaminated He Himself was "unclean". He risked running into conflict with the community health police - the Pharisees - in fact, I understand they were getting more and more angry with Jesus because of what people were saying about him. Some said He was "The Messiah". I heard also that he was getting off-side with the respectable people because he was good friends with those who were called "the dregs of society." People like me who felt oppressed and trapped, because of the circumstances of life. And yet, it's funny - that's the very reason why He came.

I heard that in the temple at Nazareth, before he started preaching and healing he was handed the Scriptures – the Old Testament – and opened the scroll at Isaiah 61 and read out loud:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor.*

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind

(and the next part I think is where I came in)

*To set free those who are downtrodden,
To proclaim the favourable year of the Lord."*

Isn't that tremendous! It seems that was the reason why he came. To release people like me from bondage. I remember when Jesus was approached by a messenger from John the Baptist, who was in prison and feeling confused because he really wondered whether or not Jesus was the true Messiah. Do you know what He said?

'Go and tell John what you see; the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.'

It seems to me that God has a special place for us "dregs", and it's right next to His heart. As I look back at the Scripture I see this more and more clearly. God has a special place for me in his heart. As I look at you, I often get the feeling that you are tolerant, polite, sometimes well meaning, but something holds you back from really touching and caring for people like me. What is it?

The wrong things and the bad things,
And the sad things that we meet,
In the filthy lane and alley and the cruel, heartless street.

I understand Henry Lawson wrote that last century. But times haven't changed, have they? I have a hunch that

if you allow yourself to feel my pain of the past and how I struggled, you'll have to change. Change your attitude, thinking, behaviour, priorities ... even your standard of living.

You don't know how hurt and angry the poor in your local community and global village really feel. You don't know how angry the poor are with the sinful structures that you accept without question, that divide the poor from the rich - and so hold the poor in a cycle that they can't break out of.

I need to remind you of what Jesus said at the final judgement, when God points the finger at the powerful who don't care and protest,

Lord, when did we see you hungry and didn't feed you, or a stranger and not invite you in, or naked and not clothe you, or in prison and not visit you?

God's answer: *"Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to me ... Depart from me accursed ones into the eternal fire which been prepared for the devil and his angels."* (Matt 25)

They're strong words from Jesus, aren't they, but He has a special place in His heart for the poor.

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What will you do to help the poor, and the "untouchables"? If you belong to the family of God, Jesus asks, "Are you your brother (or sister's) keeper? There's only one answer. Jesus said, *"I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me."* (Matthew 25:40)

Thank you for listening to my story. Remember, when you touch the poor or an untouchable, you become the hands of Jesus to that person and provide healing and hope, just like Jesus gave to old Benjamin.

PRAYER

Can you risk praying a prayer like this?

Lord, give me the courage to allow the pain and anger of 'the poor' and all the 'untouchables' to touch me, so I can be your hands and feet and bring life, liberty and hope, in your name. AMEN