

## Luke 17:11-21 – The kingdom of God is among you



Crossing borders can be challenging.

Last weekend I was in Queensland. Enough said, perhaps. Who would travel to Queensland between two grand finals? I went, however, for a high school reunion. Not that I went to high school in Queensland! I attended a missionary school in PNG, and Surfers Paradise was designated as the place most of my fellow missionary kids (now adults nearing 60) from Australia, New Zealand, North America and parts of Europe could reach. And it was a wonderful occasion – reviving old memories (and old brain cells) and making some new ones.

The big challenge was being at our 6am flight on Sunday one hour earlier! I thought – with daylight saving – that would be 4am! But then I realised – thank God for Queenslanders! – they don't observe daylight saving. Unfortunately, thanks to turning geolocation off, my phone did observe daylight saving and set my 4am wakeup for 3am! But, even more fortunately, I realised at midnight, and we got at least 4 hours of sleep that night!



Crossing borders raised more significant challenges than time zones and football fans for Jesus and his disciples. For a faithful Jew, it was hard to imagine a less likely place for the activity of God than, as described in Luke 17:11, *“going through the region between Samaria and Galilee”*. Galilee was bad enough. You might remember the crowds in John's gospel saying, *“Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee?”* But Samaria was worse. Samaritans, in Judean eyes, were ethnically compromised – the descendants of the northern tribes of Israel and other groups brought to the region by the conquering Assyrian empire.

And it is on the border, *“the region between Samaria and Galilee”*, where this tension was most rife. In 128 BCE Judeans had attacked the Samaritan sanctuary on Mt Gerizim and in Jesus' day, hostilities were still strong enough that Galileans travelling to Jerusalem often went around Samaria, though this added considerable time to their journey. Remember back in Luke 9, the start of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, where a Samaritan village refused to receive them because of where they are headed, and where James and John asked if divine power could firebomb the village, then and there.

But the writer of Luke in this story invites us to take another look at this borderland, borderline place – so we might see that God is in this place. And so we might see that God is in the confronting situation that confronts Jesus.



As Jesus entered the village, Luke 17:12, ten lepers approached him. They may not have had Hansen's disease, as we know

leprosy today, but would have suffered from a range of skin diseases assumed to be contagious. This meant they were isolated from their community and forced to fend for themselves, and as outcasts and beggars and scavengers, they were not highly regarded.

But these lepers know the rules. They keep their distance, and they call out to Jesus for mercy. And Jesus responds - also obeying the rules. He doesn't approach them or touch them, but he says, *"Go and show yourselves to the priests,"* (the ones who can declare them clean and healed so they can re-enter the community) and the lepers go, and as they go, they are healed.

The kingdom at God is clearly present in this situation. Ten lepers are healed! But something in the narrative tells us that this is more than a healing story; that what happens after the healing is even more significant.

Because, in verse 15, *"One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him... And he,"* the text says, *"He was a Samaritan."* And just in case we missed it, Jesus mentions it again. *"Were not ten made clean? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"*



And to rub the salt in, as commentator William Loader says, *"Luke has Jesus announce that this tenth leper, [this Samaritan, this foreigner] has been made whole, an image of full salvation."* *"Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."* It is a Samaritan who demonstrates true faith, who turns back, who gives God the glory, who gives thanks. It is a Samaritan – an unlikely person – in an unlikely situation – in an unlikely place – who recognises where God is active, who realises the kingdom of God in their midst.

The story is deliberately subversive. A despised Samaritan, a despairing leper, *"becomes,"* in Loader's words, *"our high priest, as it were, our model of salvation. And those who belong get it wrong. A simple but disturbing story that lives itself out in every generation"*

How does this story live itself out in our generation?



I have been reading a book one of our mission speakers, Sam Hearn, referred to, *When Helping Hurts* (it'd be an intense, but good study guide for a small group). In it, one of the authors, Steve Corbett, describes going to the Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya, the fourth largest slum in the world after slums in Karachi, Mexico City and Mumbai. There were people living in shacks made of flattened cardboard boxes. Open ditches carrying sewage. Children picking through garbage dumps looking for something of

value. As Corbett walked deeper and deeper into the slum the thought that went through his head was, *"This place is completely God-forsaken."*

But then, to his surprise, he heard a familiar hymn. *"There must be Western missionaries conducting an open-air service in here,"* he thought. But turning a corner, he found that the sound was bellowing from a roughly constructed, three by six metre 'church', packed with more than 30 people.

He was invited to preach and as a good Presbyterian, he says, he jotted down some notes about the sovereignty of God and was looking forward to what he could teach them. But then, before the sermon, there was a time of sharing and prayer. People were praying, *"God, please heal my son, as he is going blind."* *"Merciful Lord, protect me when I go home today for my husband always beats me."* *"Sovereign King, please provide for my children today as they are hungry."*

Listening to their prayers, their prayers for basic necessities, he thought about his salary and life insurance and health insurance and cars and house and realised he didn't trust in God's sovereignty, God's authority to rule over all creation, like these people did. That when they prayed the Lord's Prayer, *"Give us this day our daily bread"* their thoughts didn't wander like his did; that they had a deeper intimacy with God than he would probably ever have in his entire life.



If anyone dares suggest to me, he said, that the poor are poor because they are less spiritual than the rest of us, I am always quick to rebuke them. I immediately point out that the poor could be poor due to injustice. But discovering in that place a church filled with spiritual giants was a wake-up call to me. At some level I had implicitly assumed my economic superiority goes hand in hand with my spiritual superiority. I had embraced all the lies of the 'health and wealth gospel' – that God rewards increasing levels of faith with greater amounts of wealth - and I needed to repent if I was not to increase the poverty of the poor by re-enforcing a sense of shame and inferiority.

It was those people – in an unlikely situation – in an unlikely place – recognising God is active, realising the kingdom of God in their midst – Corbett writes, who became the model of my salvation. They blessed me even while I was trying to bless them.

How does this story live itself out in our experience?



I'm thinking back to my high school reunion last weekend in Queensland, which although fun, also had the usual undertones of assessing who had been successful, whose marriages had stayed together,

who had got their lives back on track after struggles with substance abuse or mental health, whose kids were also Christian and married and married before having children. Most of those things are wonderful things, but it felt, at times, more like a place of judgment rather than a place where the kingdom of God might be found. And yet there were also stories of people with very simple faith who had navigated great challenges with great grace. People who despite their church upbringing failing them, ultimately rejecting them, had hung in there with Christian community. People who had faced traumas they'd experienced as young people and were helping and healing others. People who were making great sacrifices to remain in difficult places, to love others.

*"Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!". The kingdom of God is coming in unlikely places and unlikely situations and unlikely people. "For in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."*

## **Prayer Litany**

The Lord's Prayer also contain the line, *"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."* Matthew 6:10 Can I invite you to pray that line, *"Your kingdom come"* after each of these short intercessions.

Into places of conflict, God, **Your Kingdom come.**

Into the hearts of world leaders **Your Kingdom come.**

Into the hearts of the soldiers and fighters **Your Kingdom come.**

Into the hearts of those bereaved by conflict and war **Your Kingdom come.**

Into the hearts of those who are hungry **Your Kingdom come.**

Into the hearts of those who have no home or country **Your Kingdom come.**

Into the hearts of those who are sick and dying **Your Kingdom come.**

Into the heart of the lonely or anxious or depressed **Your Kingdom come.**

Into the heart of one we lift up to you now...**Your Kingdom come.**

Into the heart of our world **Your Kingdom come.**

And among us **Your kingdom come. Amen**

~ adapted from <http://wellsprings.org.uk/> and posted on Third Space blog. <http://third-space.org.uk/blog>

## **Offering Prayer: Thy Kingdom Come**

In this world: kingdom living.

In our mouths: kingdom praises.

In our hearts: kingdom goals.

In our hands: kingdom gifts.

Thy kingdom come,

thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven! Amen.

~ written by Carol Penner, and posted on **Leading in Worship.** <http://carolpenner.typepad.com>