

main course

encounters in Mark's Gospel – three



Jesus and the (social) leper – Mk 1.40-45

This is one of a number of '**encounters in Mark's Gospel**' each of which enables a small-group conversation around a particular story in Mark's Gospel. These conversations aim to help you, and everyone else in your group, to:

- build up your **confidence** in actively exploring bits of the Bible
- **make connections** between the biblical story and your own life story
- find fresh **vision** for the business of being human today

all from watching and talking freely with each other about encounters between Jesus and those he meets – as we find them recorded in Mark's Gospel.

INTRODUCTION

This third **encounter in Mark's Gospel** tells of a transforming touch. The touch of Jesus cleanses the leper, but what does the touch of the leper do to Jesus? Perhaps the whole of the Gospel is met in this one exchange. See how it looks to you and your group.

STRUCTURE

Each of your **encounters in Mark's Gospel** will follow the same basic structure:

1. Assembling and beginning
2. Sharing the story of the encounter
3. Our initial reactions - sharing our own first responses
4. Extra Insights 1 – learning from Mark's big story
5. Extra Insights 2 – learning about Jesus' world
6. Exploring the Encounter Triangle
 - What do we think was learned from encountering Jesus?
 - What do we think Jesus learned from the encounter?
 - What have we learned from watching the encounter?
7. Deciding how that helps us to live now
8. (optional) Rounding it off with a song

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1. ASSEMBLING and BEGINNING

The group needs to gather, settle in and prepare for a shared conversation. This may or may not include prayer or worship or some catering option, depending on your local circumstances and context.

2. SHARING THE STORY

The conversation is started by hearing or sharing the story that will form its focus – the story told in **Mark 1.40-45**. This might be done in one of the following ways:

- Someone reads **Mark 1.40-45** straight from their Bible
- The group re-constructs the story of **Mark 1.40-45** from various rememberings
- The story of **Mark 1.40-45** is told by someone who has prepared it for telling
- A locally-devised combination of some of the above

Mark 1.40-45 is one of those stories that is present in Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel as well as in Mark, so if your group uses a remembering and re-telling approach you are going to have to decide how closely you all want to keep to Mark's particular telling.

3. OUR INITIAL REACTIONS

The group should then consider the question:

- “What is this story about?”

This can be done with a brief time of discussion in twos and threes followed by reporting to the whole group, or done as a whole group conversation – as group size and local practice allow. Let's be clear, there's no 'right' answer to this question – it's simply an assembling of ways in which hearing the story has struck group members and their memories of how they have learned its 'meaning' from past encounters and received teaching.

4. EXTRA INSIGHTS part one – learning about Jesus' world

Share the information about the social, political and religious world in which Jesus lived that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 6** at the end of these notes (*this time it's best to look at Jesus' world before looking at Mark's big story*)

5. EXTRA INSIGHTS part two – learning from Mark's big story

Share the information about how Mark has used this story and where he's placed it in his big story that's given in the EXTRA INSIGHTS on **page 7** at the end of these notes

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6. EXPLORING THE ENCOUNTER TRIANGLE

The group takes time to explore the story (in the light of their initial ideas and the Extra Insights that they've shared), standing at each triangle corner in turn:

Standing and looking at the story from the perspective of those fishermen, consider:

- **What do we think this 'leper' learned from encountering Jesus?**
 - *teasing this out ... What hopes and fears might this 'leper' have brought to Jesus? What happened to him? Why did he respond in the way he did?*

Standing and looking at the story from Jesus' perspective, consider:

- **What do we think Jesus learned from this encounter?**
 - *teasing this out ... What did Jesus bring to this exchange? What did Jesus receive from his contact with this 'leper'? What did this touch do to Jesus and his ministry? Why could he not enter any towns for some time?*

Standing where we stand, watching the whole encounter, consider:

- **What have we learned from watching this encounter?**
 - *teasing this out ... What previous understandings of this story did we bring? What have we found in the story this time? What about this story connects with our own stories? What do we take away from watching this encounter together?*

7. HOW DOES THAT HELP US TO LIVE NOW?

Now your group needs to bring it all home. Working as a group, consider two questions:

- **In what ways does this story speak to us today?**

Be imaginative. Be playful. Be daring. Be incredibly serious. Try ideas. Disagree. Come to a consensus. Work with the story like you're squeezing oranges. What good ideas to help us with living now can the group find from what you have watched?

- **What are we going to do differently now?**

Be practical. Be realistic. But be prepared to face the risks and challenges the story raises. Honestly address what the story seems to be saying to you and your situation as individuals, but also as a group, in your church and in your local community.

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8. ROUNDING IT OFF WITH A SONG (optional)

YOU TOUCHED THE LEPER based on Mark 1.40-45

tune: *Air Falalalo, Rejoice and Sing* no.637

You touched whom You should not touch when healing was claimed;
You ached for this lonely soul, excluded and shamed;
You gave him the chance to be included again;
You gave him new dignity, new gladness, but then...

You took to Yourself the touch that he offered you,
accepting the risk it brought you'd seem unclean too;
despite all your plans to preach in town after town,
You touched whom You should not touch to cleanse him, but then...

This man whom You touched and healed and told where to go
resisted the silence that You'd urged him to show
for good news of life and hope just rolled off his tongue
he had to tell ev'ryone of cleansing, but then...

You surely began to see the road you must take –
if You planned to rescue us Your life was at stake –
the touch that would cleanse us all would cost once again
excluded, denied, betrayed, You'd heal us, but then...

This story now shouts to us – whoever will hear –
it tells of Your touch of hope that cost You so dear,
Your offer of life itself begun once again.
We each can receive this gift with gladness, but then?

John M. Campbell

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

This is one of a number of **encounters in Mark's Gospel** that are being offered through the Vision4Life website. Between them these conversation materials explore a whole range of different encounters that Jesus has in the course of the Gospel story. If your group found this one helpful they may wish to try some of the others.

*Full acknowledgement for the ideas and information that have helped us to construct these materials is given in the **Introduction to the 'encounters in Mark's Gospel'** programme on the Vision4Life website:*

www.vision4life.org.uk

see the following two pages for the "Extra Insights" materials for this conversation...

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EXTRA INSIGHTS

part one – learning about Jesus' world

Living with a skin disease – 1st Century style

Reading this story nowadays we are probably hearing it in health terms - a story of Jesus 'healing a person who has a skin disease'. But this is a 1st Century story – it's a story about Jesus '**cleansing a leper**' – it's a story about how **society** reacts to him and his complaint, and that is quite different. Rural Galilean Jewish society in Jesus' time would probably have followed the clear regulations in the Hebrew Bible – in Leviticus 13.45 - these said that anyone deemed to have a leprous, possibly infectious, skin disease had to:

- *wear torn clothes*
- *let the hair of their head be dishevelled*
- *cover their upper lip and cry out "Unclean! Unclean!"*
- *live alone... 'outside the camp.'*(NRSV)

Being identified as leprous thus meant a complete dislocation of your previous life in the community. You immediately became a total outcast. Everyone would avoid you. You would not be allowed to enter a town or village, or approach even your own home or family. You would depend on food being left out for you. You truly were a 'leper' – a total social leper. This officially-sanctioned outcast status must have left you vulnerable to ugly, discriminatory behaviour – wild insults, stone throwing and unprovoked mob attacks. Your only hope would be that one day you would be declared clean by the priest (as the Law prescribed). Only then could anything like normal life or social acceptance or being yourself begin again. Meanwhile no-one must come near and certainly no-one must touch you or they would be considered unclean too.

No wonder Jesus was angry about this man's plight!

*[in verse 41, some manuscripts say Jesus was 'moved with **pity**', but others say 'moved with **anger**' – it is easier to imagine a scribe changing 'anger' to 'pity' than vice versa, so maybe the original said 'anger'. So, the plight of this man treated as a leper, in accordance with the Law of God, either made Jesus angry – or at the very least moved him with pity.]*

But becoming a known associate of a leper might mean you, too, had to stay out of town for a while – if word of this contact got out. Equally, being made clean would make you want to go everywhere and tell everyone.

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EXTRA INSIGHTS part two – learning from Mark's big story

What can we learn from the stories Mark places both before and after our story and from the way our story works in the whole- Gospel storyline?:

The bit before our bit (Mk 1.35-39)

- **A ministry of preaching and deliverance** – After that first sabbath in Capernaum, Jesus' preaching tour to all the villages and towns of Galilee is well under way. It's well organised and very successful - until Jesus meets this (social) leper.

The bit after our bit (Mk 2. 1-12)

- **Back in Capernaum** – despite the problems caused by Jesus' contact with this leper that meant he could not, for a while at least, go in to towns or villages, the next story picks up with a Jesus who is back in Capernaum with crowds pressing round him and filling his house regardless. We even find the desperate friends of a paralysed man ripping off the roof just to get him closer to Jesus. Touching Jesus is becoming a blessing, not a taboo, such is the power of his message and miracles.

Our story in the flow of Mark's whole-Gospel story

- **An irrelevance?** – Some commentators say that you could miss out our story of Jesus and the (social) leper from Mark's Gospel and not notice it had gone – is it just a wee extra story of something Jesus did that doesn't add anything to the big story?
- **The heart of the Gospel?** – If we read this as a story where Jesus gives this leper cleansing and, by the same touch, takes on himself all the risk of the leper's socially-unclean state, maybe this story tells us something of huge significance. Maybe, for Mark, it captures the essence of the Gospel and how it works both for Jesus and for an individual whom he helps. For here Jesus is able to cleanse, heal and restore a suffering outcast, but only at a significant personal cost to himself, his reputation and to his planned ministry to all the villages of Galilee. Could it be a first faint indication of how the whole Gospel will work out? Maybe.

Can we make anything of that?