

Notes for “The Chosen” series (Season 1) small groups Pastor Barry Foster

The following notes offer some background information, brief explanations related to Scriptural content and context, and suggestions for things to look for when viewing the episode. One practical note: you may find that it is easier to understand what is being said if the captions are turned on when viewing the show.

Episode 6 “Indescribable Compassion”

Jesus’ teaching ministry begins, as does his healing ministry. Two dramatic miracles of healing are featured in this episode. In each case, the healing requires divine power, for the particular infirmities (leprosy and paralysis) were incurable. In each case, Jesus overcomes a cultural or religious barrier in order to render aid to the afflicted person: for the leper, all contact with a leprosy person was forbidden; for the paralytic, the belief that suffering was a punishment for sins was commonly assumed. And, as the title for the episode indicates, in each case, we see a display of what impelled Jesus to heal—his compassion for those who were sick.

Leprosy (now known as Hansen’s disease), has been known and feared for at least three millennia.¹ According to Jewish law and customs, those afflicted with leprosy were required to live outside of any walled city or village. Contact with them was strictly forbidden. Lepers were required to announce themselves by crying out “unclean” whenever anyone got close to them. Whatever they touched became unclean (i.e., the person or item must undergo ritualized cleansing in order to be allowed to participate in religious ceremonies, such as sacrifices or feasts, or to participate in the community; that is, to interact freely with others). The fear that lepers would transmit the disease combined with the horror and disgust with which lepers were viewed put them on the absolute lowest position on the socio-cultural pyramid of value.

Some things to look for:

1. Note the disciples’ concern (especially Simon) for Jesus’ security, even while they are anxious for Jesus to declare himself and to let everyone know who he is and what he has done.

2. Nicodemus points out the disagreement between the Sadducees and the Pharisees over what constitutes genuine Scripture (God’s word): the Sadducees recognize only the Tanakh (what we call the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible) as binding, while the Pharisees recognize the Prophets and other Writings of the Old Testament as inspired and authoritative, though of a lesser authority than the Mosaic Law. Ironically, the Pharisees also regard the oral traditions of the elders (the “oral law”) as equivalent in authority to the written Law of Moses.

3. Throughout the season, we have often heard background music consisting of a woman’s voice vocalizing a meandering melody without lyrics. The tune is not typical of Western musical styles, and can even be difficult to identify. We have heard similar singing from cast members occasionally (or will hear it). This style of music is typical of Middle Eastern peoples in general, and quite likely resembles (or at least is somewhat suggestive of) what Jewish music of the first century might have sounded like. It would have been characterized by a few key features: (1) a highly melismatic² melody would predominate; (2) the musical scale would include more tones than we use in the Western music tradition (known as microtones); (3) the melody would follow certain basic formulaic structures, to which the singer would add his or her

personal or improvised variations; (4) the rhythm would be irregular and flowing; (5) harmony, whether in the form of additional voices or accompanying instruments would be minimal and of lesser importance, mainly provided by stringed instruments playing a constant tone or tones, or wind instruments (flutes) doubling the melody or providing a counter melody or echo.

Some questions to consider:

1. Is the disciples' concern for Jesus' security warranted? What are they afraid of?
2. What is the significance of Jesus' touching the leper prior to healing him? What did that action communicate to the leper? To the disciples?
3. Why does Jesus tell the paralytic that his sins are forgiven? How and why does that statement engender conflict with the Pharisees?

Endnotes

1. The biblical term, "leprosy," is used to indicate a number of different skin diseases, some of which were treatable and some which were not. The fear of contagion and the loathsome appearance of those afflicted with leprosy indicate that the form of leprosy often encountered in the biblical narratives could have been Hansen's disease.
2. "Melismatic" refers to a style of melody where a single syllable is carried over several different notes (instead of a single syllable sung for each change of note).