

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean.

Then 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 was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

REFLECTION 1:

PASSIONATE GRATITUDE

In today's Gospel story, Jesus is disappointed that only one healed leper returns to say thanks. Jesus could have related to a quote from an 18th century author, Timothy Dexter, who wrote, 'An ungrateful person is like a pig under a tree eating acorns, but never looking up to see where they came from'. Gratitude does not always follow happiness, but happiness follows gratitude. Ideally, we are not grateful because we are happy, rather we are happy because we are grateful.

In today's first reading from 2 Kings, we are told of the healing of Naaman, a Syrian commander in the army of the king, Benhadad II and in the Gospel, we become acquainted with the uniquely Lucan miracle of the 10 lepers. All were healed, but only one bothered to return to Jesus to offer worship and thanksgiving. What did Naaman and the healed Samaritan leper have in common? Not only were both healed, both were also transformed by the experience. Naaman came to believe in the God of Elisha and from then on would worship no other God. The grateful Samaritan was doubly doomed in the eyes of the Jews, first by his leprosy and then by the fact that he was a Samaritan. He chose not to obey Jesus by neglecting to go and show himself to the priests. Rather he returned to Jesus, glorified God and thanked Him. For this he was assured that his faith had saved him. Following his heart rather than Jesus' order, the 10th leper was so driven by the experience of being made whole, free and newly alive that he could not help it. He was moved by a sense of such passionate love and gratitude that he felt compelled to return to the One who had made it all possible.

This is the same love and gratitude that should drive us to return to that great feast of thanksgiving that we call Eucharist. Gathered together each week, we hear the words of Jesus who challenges us to be healed of our pride, selfishness, anger, apathy, laziness and deceit. We are reminded to serve the needs of others, especially the poor among us. We eat the bread of life that nourishes and heals our brokenness. Then we are sent out into the rest of the week to witness to all we have known of Jesus. We work, we serve, we pray, we love; we remember and give thanks for all God's gifts until we are drawn yet again to give thanks at the Eucharist – an expression of faith, a spiritual oasis, a place to fuel up for the week ahead. The words of Vatican II come to mind, "The liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed and the font from which all its power flows. For the goal of apostolic endeavour is that all who are made sons and daughters of God, should come together to praise God in the midst of the Church, to take part in the sacrifice and eat the Lord's Supper. We have heard these words for over 50 years, but they still ring true with every repetition.

Some may very well ask as to why we keep coming back week after week to celebrate the sacred mysteries? How could we possibly stay away? Like Naaman and the leper we have the opportunity at every Eucharist encounter to be transformed by God and fall at Jesus' feet and thank him. This is what happens, bringing us back to the one who never stops giving, and loving. Each time we return, Jesus will assure us, 'Go, your faith has saved you'.

REFLECTION 2: THE LEPER WHO PRAISED GOD

In common talk when we refer to someone as a 'leper' we are not using the word in a medical, but rather in a social sense: the person is 'cut off' from others. In the Old Testament 'leprosy' with a general word used for many and various diseases of the skin. It was something that made people unclean and required them to be separated from the general community. To be a leper was to be an outcast who was shunned and had no part in society. It is interesting that both Naaman (First Reading) and the leper who comes back to give thanks, are foreigners. They were not part of the people - they were already outsiders. That they are particular recipients of mercy is therefore doubly significant. We can see that their cure was a sign that God's care is far wider than mere social acceptance. On reflection 'our' own criteria for who belongs may be too restrictive – 'them' out there and 'us' here! It is also worth noting that the care of the two foreign lepers brings conversion. Naaman takes the soil of Israel back with him to Syria so that he can offer sacrifice to Israel's God. It is noteworthy that Jesus doesn't use the words 'thanks or gratitude' but rather he remarked that no one had returned to give praise to God except this stranger.

It is also worth noting that the cure of the two foreign lepers brings conversion. The invitation for us who hear these readings is to ponder that our experience of being an outsider is like being a sinner, but like Naaman and the Samaritan leper we have been brought into the people of God by an act of mercy. As Paul reminds us 'We may be unfaithful, but He is always faithful'. As Pope Francis constantly reminds us, the mercy of God is always available to us, just as it was to the two healed lepers. Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary General of the United Nations, in his diary acknowledged God's gifts with the words, 'For all that has been, thanks, and for all that will be, yes!'.