

Sunday 13th October 2019: Trinity 17.

The Healing of the Ten Lepers Luke 17:11-19; the healing of Naaman 2 Kings:1-3;7-15c; Epistle 2 Timothy 2:8-15

May I speak and may you listen in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen

My brother and I were very fortunate in belonging to a large family. Dad was one of eight and mum one of four, so we had many uncles, aunts and cousins. At Christmas time there would be many presents for us from our uncles and aunts found under the tree - games, books and sweets. We'd enjoy these gifts for three or four days before mum or dad gave us the reminder that we must now write our "thank you" letters, ensuring we posted them before the New Year arrived. Brother and I would groan for we didn't really look forward to the chore of writing such letters. Now, of course, I can look back with gratitude and give thanks to mum and dad for teaching us very clearly the importance of saying "thank you". It is too easy to forget to be thankful; too easy to take things for granted, for surely when we say "thank you" it is not only valued by the recipient, but it is good for us too.

In this morning's Gospel reading we are directed to the importance of giving thanks to God for his many gifts. We are told immediately where Jesus was..."on his way to Jerusalem between Samaria and Galilee". This was a mixed race region, so perhaps we are being prepared for an event involving race or racial prejudice. As he enters a village in this area, he is approached from a distance - that paints an interesting picture - by ten lepers who call out to him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us". These ten lepers were desperate people who did desperate things. They obviously had heard of Jesus. In their faith they called out to Jesus and they had no choice but to do it from a distance. No NHS walk in for them! No A and E! No local GP! Lepers in those days were outcasts, beyond the pale, people to be avoided at all costs. They were outsiders who lived on the outskirts of towns and villages.

Leprosy is a chronic infection causing sores, eventually nerve damage and can lead to hands becoming like fists and further disfigurement. In Biblical times it

was everywhere - we heard of Naaman, the army commander, being cured of leprosy by washing himself seven times in the River Jordan in our Old Testament Reading - and it was often a term used to cover a multitude of skin ailments. Not only was it considered incurable, but those diagnosed were banned from society. They were the untouchables, forced to cover the lower parts of their faces and cry out when others approached them, "Unclean! Unclean!" I'm reminded of how we saw the victims of Aids in the mid 80s. Remember the frightening television adverts with the word "Aids" carved into rocks or icebergs and the slogans, "Don't die of ignorance!" and "If you ignore this disease, it could be the death of you!" Those suffering from AIDS in the 80s became the equivalent untouchables of the lepers of Biblical times.

The ten untouchables didn't approach Jesus asking for healing, but seeking his mercy, his pity and compassion. Such sufferers relied on the gifts of food and clothing from their healthier family and friends. Surely this great teacher and prophet would produce something to ease their pain? So I wonder how they felt when Jesus simply said, "Go and show yourself to the priests." Would they have been surprised, or excited, or embarrassed? They knew that you would show yourself to a priest to receive assurance that you were healed, clean, free to be re-admitted to the society to which you rightly belonged. They certainly accepted his words. They didn't laugh or refuse to go because we are told "as they went they were made clean." They obeyed the words of Jesus. They showed complete faith in his instruction and they went to find the priest. Only after they heard and then followed the words of Jesus were they healed. What joy, what singing and dancing there must have been. "Look my skin is healed. My body is whole again." How powerful faith can be. Faith and healing go together. Yet for nine of the lepers their faith was only skin deep, if you'll pardon the pun. Only one, just one when he realised he was healed, praised God with a loud voice, returned to Jesus, threw himself at his feet and thanked him. Faith and healing may indeed go hand in hand, but of what value is faith without gratitude? The rhythm of faith and gratitude is what being a Christian is all about in this 21st century, not only following and obeying the words of our Lord, but worshipping and praising him for all he has done and continues to do.

And the one who returned was a “Samaritan” or a “foreigner” as Jesus called him. Here’s the event, to which I referred earlier, which is racially charged. As this healing took place between Galilee and Samaria we can be assured that the group of ten lepers would come from both regions. Leprosy makes no distinction of difference in race, class, culture or values. How many of the ten were Jews and how many Samaritans we don’t know. Perhaps the one who thanked Jesus was the only Samaritan. Whatever the point is clearly made. This outsider, this foreigner, this Samaritan shows up the Jews, whose very name reminded them to praise God - the word “Judah” in Hebrew meaning “Praise” - by being the only one to give God the glory. In “doing to others as you would have them do to you” we might often be miffed if the recipient of our kindness doesn’t show their thanks. Ingratitude is difficult to accept. So it is with Jesus. “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine where are they?” If your soul is to be healed as well as your body faith has to be accompanied by gratitude, that personal contact that personal submission to God. Gratitude is expected for full salvation.

At its core thanksgiving is an act of humility - it acknowledges our debt to the other person. Thankfulness and gratitude to God should lead to action and commitment to the world God has placed us in. “Praise the Lord!” is not just a slogan or something nice to do; it is a command. Praise God for his many blessings. Like the cleansed leper let us fall in adoration at his feet. The allocated Psalm for today, Psalm 111, says it all:

“Alleluia! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart
in the company of the faithful and in the congregation.
The works of the Lord are great
sought out by all who delight in them.”

Bill Pattinson

10.10.19

