

The 28th Sunday of Year C: Being unclean; being healed; being grateful.

1st Reading: 2 Kings 5:14-17: Naaman, a pagan officer, is cleansed;

2nd Reading: 2 Tim. 2:8-13: They can chain up Paul, but not the gospel;

Gospel: Luke 17:11-19: Ten lepers are cleansed; only one says ‘thanks’.

As so often happens with the three readings, the first one (from the Old Testament) is chosen to relate to the gospel, while the second (or middle) one has a theme all to itself. In the case of the latter, we are going through St Paul’s second letter to the young bishop Timothy – whom he had ordained – with Paul’s usual mixture of theology and down-to-earth advice.

I’ll take this middle reading first. It deals with a topic with which many will be familiar – the embarrassment, awkwardness and even suffering that can go with being known as a follower of Jesus. Last week, I mentioned this with reference to young people, but can it also apply to adults. In Paul’s case, it was worse: he was under house-arrest in Rome. Later, he was freed, but then re-arrested and eventually beheaded, under one of the first persecutions of the minority Christian sect in that city. Paul’s confidence comes across: they might chain Paul up, but they can’t chain up, or confine, the gospel message about Jesus, the truth of his resurrection and what that means. Paul quotes what seems to have been a very early hymn or saying about Christ: “If we have died with him, then we shall live with him; if we hold firm, we shall reign with him. If we disown him, he will disown us...he is always faithful, for he cannot disown his own self.” I suggest Paul means that our relationship with Jesus is nothing like anything in the natural world: It is based on faith in his resurrection, and the divine power that lay behind that. If we have that, we are really strong.

And so to leprosy – or, more precisely, the reaction to being cured of it. The first reading is the end of a convoluted story (set around 850 BC) about the Syrian general Naaman, a leper, who had heard that the “prophet in Israel” – Elisha – could cure people of such things. After a quite confusing series of events, he got to see Elisha, who simply told him to wash in the rather muddy water of the River Jordan. Eventually, he did so, and was made clean. He wanted to thank Elisha by a payment; Elisha refused, so Naaman did a strange thing: he took home some bags of soil from Israel, so that he could offer sacrifice to the Lord. Like many primitive peoples, he felt that the “God of Israel” could only be worshipped in the land of Israel, so he wanted to take the soil home, and make a ‘piece of Israel’ back in his own country. Before we dismiss this as totally barmy, it’s worth remembering that we often bring home souvenirs of foreign trips and use them as

bits of domestic equipment – eg, cutlery & plates. Naaman was trying (in his own way) to say ‘thanks’ to God.

The gospel tells of Jesus’ cure of ten lepers while he and his disciples were still on their long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Near a spot where the Jewish area of Galilee bordered the very non-Jewish area of Samaria, ten lepers approached him. Given the terror that this disease caused, they had to keep their distance, so they had to call out to him, “Jesus! Master! Take pity on us!” He immediately told them, “Show yourselves to the priests.” This was an official means of being declared free of the disease, so they would have been relieved. Of the ten, only one returned to Jesus; he shouted praise of God, threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. The man was a Samaritan – an enemy, in the sight of most Jews. Jesus commented that this ‘foreigner’ was the only one to praise God for the cure. Jesus told him, “Your faith has saved you.”

I suggest we draw two ideas from the stories of Naaman and the ten lepers. The first is that saying “Thank you” – and meaning it - can be difficult both for the person saying it, and for the person to whom it is said. When we thank someone, it means we are acknowledging that we are in their debt, however small the matter may be – as when a door has been held open. Some people hate ‘being helped’ – they feel the whole thing to be an attack on their self-sufficiency or independence, so they find saying ‘Thank you’ embarrassing. On the other hand, when we have done a good turn for someone, if their thanks are too profuse, it is us who feel embarrassed. Most do not like too much fuss.

The second idea is more spiritual. Naaman’s wish to take the soil of Israel to Syria (so that he could worship and thank the God of Israel back home) reminds us that “Holy Eucharist” literally means “special thanksgiving”. Both Naaman and the Samaritan in the gospel recognised that something special had been done to them, and therefore felt to need to worship God. In our society, I suspect that we often take too much for granted, and could do with a deeper sense of gratitude. Those of us who have had operations – emergency or pre-booked (“elective”) – are grateful to the surgeons and medical staff, and the NHS system that lets us access their services. Others have a comfortable lifestyle. I know they have had to work hard for this, but there are millions, here and elsewhere, who work equally hard, yet are barely able to survive. Perhaps we could all see going to Mass (or other services) as our way of thanking God for the lives we can lead, despite the current cost-of-living & energy problems.

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