

Obedience of Faith and Gratitude

Meditation on Lk 17:11-19. 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time¹

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The Prophet Elisha Cleansing Naaman

Today in the Gospel we read the story of the cleansing of ten lepers and the thankfulness of one of them. Jesus was passing by a town located between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered the village ten lepers stood at a distance and raised their voice saying, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us.” At the time of Jesus, persons with leprosy² were considered unclean, and contact with them would render others unclean as well. Lepers were confined to distant places, out of town. They were physically and morally excluded from the community. That is why when they saw Jesus passing by, they cried out for help.

What did Jesus do? He saw them and told them, “go, show yourselves to the priests.” The rituals of the time prescribed that when a person had been recovered from

leprosy, they would have to follow a series of rituals to remove the “moral” impurity from them and from the places they were in contact with. And part of those rituals was to go to show to the priests.

All of them did as Jesus commanded. And on their way they were healed. It is important to remark that they did not receive their healing right away. However, they trusted in Jesus’ word and did as he told them. It was an act of faith on their part. The obedience of faith. Who were those lepers? We don’t know exactly but in that group there were Israelites (persons who belong to the people of God) and foreigners, including a Samaritan. They were considered pagans because they adored false idols.

On their way they were healed, but it happened that only one, the Samaritan came back to thank Jesus. It was not only a simple act of gratitude. It was much more than that, “He returned glorifying God in a loud voice, and he fell at the feet of Jesus.” (Lk 17:15-16). Jesus told him “Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?’ Then he said to him ‘Stand up and go; your faith has saved you’” (Lk 17: 17-19). Nine lepers were healed, but only one of them received healing and salvation. The Samaritan obtained his salvation due to his obedience to the word of Jesus and his sense of gratitude to God. The Samaritan is teaching us a first lesson, our obedience to the word of God and our gratitude to him will lead us to salvation. Jesus heals in a twofold way, he heals the soul, and the body. Jesus brings total healing. Physical healing is an outward

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² The term “leprosy” covered a wide variety of skin disorders like psoriasis, eczema, and seborrhea, but probably not Hansen’s disease.

expression of the deepest salvation. It reveals to us the importance of soul and body. Such healing require the obedience of faith from the believer.

In the first reading we have a similar case. The second book of Kings narrates the cure of Naaman, who was a Syrian army officer cured of leprosy by the prophet Elisha. Having learned of the reputation of Elisha, Naaman went to Israel to seek a cure. When he arrived, the prophet gave instructions that he should dip himself in the Jordan seven times. At first Naaman, who had expected the prophet to heal him in person, was angry and disappointed. His servants, however, persuaded him to follow Elisha's instructions. He washed in the Jordan and was healed³. He reluctantly trusted in the word of the prophet and he received his healing. So he came back to the prophet to thank him. He received healing of body and a conversion, which lead him to acknowledge the one God for whom we live: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel."

Both Naaman, the Syrian and the Samaritan were affected with leprosy. They were pagans, they did not believe in the one and true God. But they obeyed to the word spoken to them. They had an initial act of faith, and they received their healing of soul and body. Both Naaman and the Samaritan, are witnesses of how the Lord has made his victory known, as we said in Psalm 98 today, "The Lord has done marvelous deeds, whose right hand and holy arm have won the victory. In the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation by our God."

Naaman the Syrian and the Samaritan reminds us today that we must always trust in the Lord, even though we do not receive right away what we are asking for. If what we are asking is for the wellbeing of our soul and our salvation, we will get it. If not, God will give us his Holy Spirit to be our Comforter, and our Consoler in times of distress. He will take us from rejection to acceptance, from doubt to trust, from fear into safety.

Naaman and the Samaritan also reminds us that we must be grateful with God for everything we have. People take many things for granted, and it seems that there is an eternal dissatisfaction. An eternal dissatisfaction is modern day leprosy, one of the components of today's secularized world. Businesses and corporations want to make you believe that you always need more to be satisfied... and more and more. Naaman and the Samaritan reminds us today that we must be grateful for what we have received from God. If our heart is not full of gratitude. If our heart is always complaining because we want to have more and more, it is a sign that we have not become the new man that St. Paul talks about, "you should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth." (Eph 4:22-24). An eternal dissatisfaction is also a sign that we are not being realistic, that we live in our own world, not in the reality that God wants us to be.

We need to be grateful but most importantly to "give praise to God" at all times. In the Gospel we saw how the Samaritan returned glorifying God. We have received many blessings and miracles from God. How many times he has delivered our loved one and ourselves from trials, sickness, sufferings, hardships, or tribulations of all kinds? At the end of the day I would encourage you to make an

³ McCarter, P. K., Jr. (2011). Naaman. In M. A. Powell (Ed.), *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary (Revised and Updated)* (Third Edition, p. 676). New York: HarperCollins.

examination of conscience, what you did right and what you can improve. Include in it three things for which you are grateful to God. Do that everyday.

Jesus is always close to those who suffer. But it is important to go to him. As St. Augustine says, "God heals your infirmities. Do not be afraid, therefore, all your infirmities will be healed. You must only allow him to cure you" (Exposition on Psalm 102). Jesus is visible to us through the sacraments administered by the Church. It is in the two sacraments of healing that Jesus touches our bodies and heals our soul. In the sacrament of anointing of the sick, the sacramental oil is offered to us as God's medicine, which offers comfort and consolation. It is in the sacrament of confession that he restores us his grace.

As Pope Benedict XVI said, times of suffering (in which one could be tempted to abandon oneself to discouragement and hopelessness) can be transformed into a time of grace and a time to glorify God. Those times can be an opportunity to have a new and better relationship with God and with others. Many saints experienced their conversion of heart after a serious illness, one of them was St. Francis of Assisi. He composed this prayer to give praise to God in all circumstances,

"Thou art holy, Lord God, who alone workest wonders. Thou art strong. Thou art great. Thou art most high. Thou art the Almighty King, Thou, Holy Father, King of heaven and earth. Thou art the Lord God Triune and One; all good. Thou art good, all good, highest good, Lord God living and true. Thou art charity, love. Thou art wisdom. Thou art humility. Thou art patience. Thou art security. Thou art quietude. Thou art joy and gladness. Thou art justice and temperance. Thou art all riches to sufficiency. Thou art beauty. Thou art meekness. Thou art protector. Thou art guardian and defender. Thou art strength. Thou art refreshment. Thou art our hope. Thou art our faith. Thou art our great sweetness. Thou art our eternal life, great and admirable Lord, God Almighty, merciful Savior."