Homily: 28th Sunday in Ord. Time (C)

*2 Kings 5:14-17; 2 Tim. 2:8-13 & Lk. 17:11-19*

Probably very few – if any – of us sitting here this morning have ever met a leper. Worldwide, the WHO suggests that there are about 180-200,000 cases of chronic leprosy – that is, those infected by *Mycobacterium leprae* or its cousin organism *Mycobacterium lepromatosis* – with perhaps another 200,000 new cases identified and treated each year. Leprosy is relatively rare now, even compared with many millions who suffered with it just a few decades ago, due to improvements in multiple antibiotic therapies, though it is still very much associated with areas of high poverty and deprivation.

I suspect that, from our reading of the gospel stories if from nowhere else, many of us will have a pretty strong mental image of what lepers were forced to suffer in the time of Christ and in the mediaeval world. Leprosy was believed to be highly contagious (which, in fact, true leprosy is not), and was also associated with ritual impurity and sinfulness, with the disease seen as a punishment for sin. In the Holiness Code of Leviticus, a whole chapter (c.13) is dedicated to leprosy and its “diagnosis”, and it is clear from the text that it included a number of diseases and infections under the general heading of “leprosy” – far wider than modern medicine would recognise. Partly an essay on ritual purity, partly a manual of “public health”, Leviticus gives more balanced and humane instructions than you might expect, with any possible cases “quarantined” for a week and then re-examined by the priests, and quite clear differentiation between different types of skin eruption. Yet at the end of the section, it gives the following instruction: *The leper... is to wear torn clothes and let his hair hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry “Unclean, unclean”. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease... he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp* (Lev.13:45-46). It is from this instruction that, in many ways, the true horror of leprosy in Jesus’ time sprang. The leper was an outcast from society, forced to live alone (or at best with other lepers), excluded from normal life. Worse, his ritual impurity cut him off not only from civil society but also from religious observance – so that he was a “non-person” – with no relationship with friends and family, and no “official” relationship with God.

We see eleven lepers, eleven of these “non-persons” in today’s readings. There are the ten lepers cured by Jesus in the Gospel, and there is also Naaman the Syrian, the commander of the Syrian army, who is cured of leprosy by washing in the Jordan at the command of the prophet Elisha, as we heard in the first reading. At first sight, it might seem that only two are significant – Naaman the Syrian and the unnamed Samaritan leper who turns back to give thanks. Both are clearly deeply moved by their experience of healing. Naaman is eager to reward Elisha and, when thwarted in that, makes that strange request for two donkey-loads of soil from Israel. It is, in effect, his sign of conversion, his sign of new life. He will take that soil home, and on it build an altar – soil from Israel on which he will worship the *God* of Israel. It is a radical sign of conversion. The Samaritan too is deeply touched – finding himself cured, he praises God and falls at Jesus’ feet to thank him too. That thanksgiving is, as Jesus clearly points out, the appropriate response to the healing. Brought back into Israel, brought back to God through the power of the Lord, it is as if he has been raised from the dead, that living death of leprosy, and given a new life – and for that he shouts and sings for joy.

But, to paraphrase Jesus only slightly, where *are* the other nine? Are they just insignificant characters, shadows in Luke’s narrative which give Jesus the chance to draw a moral lesson about the importance of gratitude, and a lesson in “inclusivity” since it is the Samaritan, the foreigner, who again in Luke puts the people of Israel to shame? Well, actually, I think there’s more to it than that. Perhaps I’m being more generous than they deserve, but I wonder if – finding themselves cured, given that *same* gift of new life for which the Samaritan thanked Jesus – they were *so* amazed, *so* excited, that it drove every thought of gratitude from their minds in their haste to fulfil Jesus’ command to see the priests and be formally re-admitted to their community. It is still the “wrong response” of course; of course they too should have returned. Nonetheless, their response seems all too familiar (at least to me), their response seems all too human – that excitement and joy at a gift received can drive out all thoughts of gratitude.

And what about us? Where do *we* stand in this gospel narrative? For I think this little gospel has something very important to remind us too. Think again of those words Paul wrote to Timothy: *I bear all (this hardship) for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they... may have the salvation that is in Christ Jesus and the eternal glory that comes with it*. Paul is on fire with the Good News, not for himself, but only because he knows it to be important for *us* – that *we* should find salvation. For we have been given a better gift even than Naaman and the ten lepers. We are freed, not from the living death of leprosy, but from the living death of sin. We are freed to worship the one true God. We are freed to form the one united community of faith whose end is a share in the glory of the Risen Lord. And how often do we remember that? How often, remembering that God has touched *our* lives through the power of Christ, do we turn and give thanks? Or are we too, like the nine, so excited and amazed by what we have been given, that we too forget to say “Thanks”?

And if we find this “forgetfulness” a besetting sin, then we are in very good company. The whole salvation history of Israel is one of “forgetting God” – at least until things were so desperate they *had* to call upon him. In the wilderness, all they could remember was the garlic and cucumbers of Egypt, not their freedom from slavery and the marvels at the Red Sea. Once In Israel, all they could think of were the riches of the Promised Land, not who had given it to them. Again and again in the Psalms, we hear phrases like “but they soon forgot God’s deeds, and would not walk according to his will”. Our problem is not necessarily one of ingratitude, but forgetfulness of reality, the reality that all we have and are is a gift from God.

Yet all is not lost. When I was a “baby monk” and struggling with this self-same forgetfulness and ingratitude in prayer, I found a very simple help. Each time I heard the Abbey clock chime, whatever I was doing, I would stop for a moment and think of the Lord’s goodness to me, and perhaps even say the “Gloria Patri...” Here in Oxford, we are blessed to live in a city of bells, even if we no longer have the *Angelus*. Here, perhaps, we could try the same little trick, and let the voice of our mediaeval churches and colleges, their bells, be a constant memorial to us of God’s love, a constant “reawakening to mindfulness” of all that He has done for us.

And in our liturgy too, there is the same feature. Again and again, we ask God to remember us – *remember Lord, your Church; remember, Lord, your servants; remember our departed brothers and sisters*. But at the heart of all our Liturgy it is we who *must* remember, as we recall Christ’s words at the Last Supper: *Do this in memory of me*. So often, in our excitement and our business, we are like the nine – running away with the gifts we have been given in our eagerness to use them, whatever they may be, and forgetting to remember whence they came. We live so often in an awful parody of Christ’s words – This is my body, which is for *me*. Yet at each Eucharist, in each thanksgiving we make for the gift of salvation, we recall the real truth of that total outpouring of our Saviour to us and for us: This is my Body, which is for *you*. That is the core of our life. That is our reality. For that, in loving remembrance of Him, we - this morning and every day – must give heartfelt thanks. Amen.

© Fr Oswald McBride OSB

8.10.16