

Luke 17:11-19 – “Giving Thanks” – Oct 10/04 (Thanksgiving Sunday)

If any of you watch the CBC comedy show *Royal Canadian Air Farce*, you’ll know Roger Abbott’s parody of Don Newman ... “Hello, I’m Don Newman – blah, blah, blah, blah, blah”. That’s a bit how I feel approaching a sermon on a Sunday connected with a secular holiday – for example, Thanksgiving: “Thanksgiving – blah, blah, blah ... giving thanks, blah, blah, blah”. Too often we have to grasp at a tired text from scripture, and bend it and stretch it until it fits the theme du jour.

However, there is a text that not only comes to mind for this occasion but is indeed recommended by the lectionary for this year - a story that appropriately enough centers around or at least features someone giving thanks.

And a fascinating story it is as well – actually, it is really two stories in one, but more on that in a minute. This story is unique to Luke – none of the other gospel authors were moved to include this incident of the healing of ten lepers. I’m glad it was Luke who brought it to us, for he is a superb story-teller. Can you imagine how it would have been written by Mark? ... Jesus met ten lepers. Immediately, they were healed. One said thanks.

But Luke, with his incredible capacity to provide sufficient essential details, brings the story to life with true realism. “On the way to Jerusalem”, he opens, and at once we have in our mind the path leading to the cross and beyond, certainly what Luke had in mind. To anchor us at the same time in the reality of Jesus’ ministry Luke goes on to frame the scene: “Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” Luke doesn’t seem to mind that the location is a bit unusual, being somewhat out of the way for someone heading to Jerusalem. The scene is set, with us remembering Jesus’ coming sacrifice in Jerusalem, and introduces the reminder that Samaria is not Jewish territory.

And as with all good storytellers, Luke now narrows in the focus, helping us to see Jesus entering a village. Not a city, not a town, but a village – dust, some palm trees, woodsmoke. We can picture a few less-than-prosperous houses strung raggedly along a short stretch of road, an image enhanced by a rag-tag group materializing from beyond the buildings. It becomes clear to us that they are lepers, and we recoil as they approach but are somewhat reassured as they keep their distance. You can almost smell the fear along with the usual smells of a Galilean village, a fear that we will catch whatever disease ails them simply by breathing the same air.

Now the sounds – the bleating of the livestock, the pleading of the outcasts. “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”, they cry out. And he does – have mercy on them, that is. These poor unfortunates, banned from society, burdened by a religious restraining order to keep their distance from everything and everybody, receive the full mercy of God at work in Jesus. Without so much as a word against their disease, without any magical incantations or special rites or flagrant demonstrations of his divine power, Jesus simply tells them to go report to the priests, an act that will both confirm their healing and readmit them into the presence of people again. The lepers follow Jesus’ command, and obediently head off to do as they were told, and as they do so they see the healing take place.

That ends the first story. A healing story, clearly showing us (and the lepers!) the power of God at work in Jesus. Without so much as a “be clean!” they are healed. We could wrap the story there and wander away ourselves feeling very good about what had happened – sort of a “they lived happily ever after” kind of ending.

But then begins the second story, or the second significant part of the whole story. One of the ten who were cured returned to Jesus. Now, we remember that he thanked Jesus. That’s the powerful connection with today being Thanksgiving Sunday. But he did more than just thank Jesus – he praised God in a loud voice. To him the connection between Jesus and God was clear – his healing was not the result of some magic trick by Jesus, but a very demonstration of the power of God at work in Jesus. “Praise God from whom all blessings flow”, we can almost hear him singing. Another happy ending.

But there's more. This man is not a Jew. He is a foreigner, a Samaritan. How can this be? Of all ten who were cured, how is it that only a foreigner returned to acknowledge God's goodness? Can it be possible that God's mercy in Christ Jesus was, and is, not just for the righteous clan of David but for all people?

That clearly is the message of the second part of the story, a message that makes the story relevant for us, meaningful to you and to me. It is a hugely profound message of God's grace available not to just a chosen few but to Jew and Gentile alike, a message that would be affirmed and reaffirmed as the apostles began to spread the good news across the world.

It is true there are some questions raised by this incident - for example, why was the Samaritan, a foreigner, also told to go to the priests? Probably it was to obtain an official clearance, in order to be able to function in the Jewish world, even though as a foreigner - we can't be sure. But along with the questions there are answers as well, answers that bring us a great deal of certainty and surety in our faith.

To begin, it is important to note the unconditional healing effected by Jesus. He did not say, "grovel in the dirt", or "give ten percent", or "if your faith is deep enough, your prayers long enough and heartfelt enough, then I will heal you". He responded to their plea for mercy, and healed them. The healing had already begun as he sent them on their way to complete the reentry process back into society, and life. He didn't pick and choose, saying, "you three there on the right, you're cured ... the rest of you will have to work harder at earning a cure." Jesus didn't react to any demands from the lepers that they had suffered enough, waited long enough, prayed hard enough that they deserved to be healed. No, Jesus responded to their simple plea for mercy, and cured them - ten out of ten - Jew and Gentile alike.

We should note also that Jesus did not reject the nine Jewish lepers - they were blessed with his healing. He didn't reach out in a capricious snit and say, "oops, you weren't grateful enough - I'm taking it back". Neither did he set aside the Jewish law for them - they were sent to the priests as the law required. But in an echo of the Old Testament story in which Naaman, a foreigner and a leper, was cleansed and converted to Israel's faith, here also a foreign outsider teaches the people of God what faith is, what praise is, and what thanksgiving is.

That's why Luke felt compelled to tell us this story, to bring this incident to our attention - to teach us and to remind us that God's love and grace covers us as well. Not because our faith is deep enough; not because we can grovel so well in the dust; not because we deserve it, but because we know we need it, and because we have asked for God's mercy we are assured of his grace, mercy and forgiveness through Jesus, now the risen Christ. We have been forgiven - we have been healed, and the Samaritan in that dusty village provides us with a model for our faith: giving praise to God with a loud voice, prostrating ourselves in joyful relief offering thanks for the gift of life, the gift of wholeness, the gift of redemption, the gift of freedom from sin, the gift of being restored to the community of the faithful, surrounded by and sharing with neighbours and friends and family the joy of abundant life.

That's what this precious story is about. It is not about going "tsk, tsk" about the nine who obeyed the command to fulfill the law of righteousness, but instead it is about recognizing ourselves in the Samaritan - outsiders, foreigners, Gentiles, unworthy and unclean - made whole and clean and accepted and reconciled with God and given new abundant life by Jesus, and if that isn't reason enough to give thanks and praise in a loud voice, I don't what could be. All praise and thanks be to God for his gift of mercy and grace in Christ Jesus, our Lord.