

Twenty Eighth Sunday October 09, 2016

2 Kings 5:14-17; 2 Timothy 2:8-13; Luke 17:11-19

God has a prominent place in the life of every individual. He is the one who has created every person and has given life and sustenance, while continually giving his protection and care. What is expected of us is gratitude to him and becoming aware how much we have been given. Gratitude is an expression of the heart, counting the blessings and acknowledging everything that a person receives. It means learning to live one's life as if everything were a miracle; Gratitude shifts our focus from what our life lacks to the abundance that is already present. In addition, behavioural and psychological research has shown the surprising life improvements that can stem from the practice of gratitude. Giving thanks makes people happier and more resilient, it strengthens relationships, it improves health, and it reduces stress. The readings of today present the theme of gratitude that should come spontaneously from the heart of every individual. In the first reading we have the healing of Naaman the Syrian and the expression of his gratitude to God for taking away his sickness through his prophet. A foreigner becomes a model of faith to God's chosen people. His greatest joy is serving the Lord. In the Gospel we have the story of the ten lepers who come to Jesus for healing. Jesus is always present to heal us. Only one of them, a Samaritan healed of leprosy returns to Jesus to praise God and express his gratitude to for such a grace while the nine others who were healed show no gratitude at all. The second reading calls for unity with Jesus in faith and he will certainly respond to us in our necessities. He died for us and was raised from the dead and he is always faithful to his promise.

In the First Reading from the Second Book of Kings we have the healing of Naaman, a foreigner in the land of Israel. Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. The King sends him to the Kingdom of Israel for his healing. But the king of Israel misunderstands the entire motive of his coming and shows his anger which is countered by Prophet Elisha. In the name of Yahweh Elisha sends a message to Naaman to cleanse himself in River Jordan. Even though Naaman refuses at first, carries out the order given by the Prophet and is healed. Here we see the conversion of the pagan dignitary into believing in true God. He is even more surprised when the healer refuses any reward for the task done. Naaman believes that Yahweh is the healer and he

proclaims to all that there is no other God in the universe other than the God of Israel. This healing episode tells us that when we pray to God we trust in him and we allow him to act in his own way. Secondly in our relationship with God must be of humility, submission and obedience. Finally the work of God is unique and must not be accompanied by physical rewards but there should be an inner conversion of heart.

The Second Reading from the Second Letter of Paul to Timothy begins by saying that Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David, emphasizing the Messianic Kingship of Christ. Paul at this time in prison in Rome and speaks of the hardships he suffered for Christ even being chained for his sake. In such difficulty he can still preach the Word of God indicating that the Good News can be delivered from any situation and the word of God cannot be chained. Paul uses his very sufferings as a means of bringing Gospel to others. Because of this marvellous end result, Paul was even more determined to persevere for the sake of those who have been called and have responded to God's calling, so that they may also persevere to the end and obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus. Paul concludes by saying that if we die with him we will also be raised with him, if we deny him he will deny us and our fidelity to him is essential to live the fullness of life. The Lord is faithful to us even if we are faithless in him. Thus having died with Christ, our lives are hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life is revealed, then we also will be revealed with Him in glory. Our perseverance in the living faith, in whatever the Lord God permits to come our way for our sanctification, will be our assurance of salvation. Our perseverance is one of the many ways of saying thanks to God for what He has given us.

In today's Gospel we have the narrative of healing the ten lepers by Jesus, and Luke tells us that nine of them Jews, and the other a Samaritan. This incident took place as Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where he was going to his imminent death on the cross. We are touched by the mercy and kindness of Jesus who reaches out to the outcasts of the society such as the lepers and at the same time we are reminded of the lack of insensitivity in human persons while receiving a favour from a benefactor. Jesus encounters the ten lepers and when they saw Jesus they stood a great distance and shouted. They had no illusions about their helpless situation. Their only hope now was the compassion of Jesus, the Master and Lord, who was the living embodiment of the mercy and compassion of God. Their request is for Jesus to have mercy on them. Ordinarily such request would have been understood as monetary help. However, they did believe in the power of Jesus and received the gift of

healing. Jesus does not touch them as he does elsewhere and work the miracle. Instead he sends them to the priests to perform the necessary ceremony and get a declaration to be accepted back into the society. Their disease did not disappear on the spot as was the case with other cures. He tested their faith and they received the healing as they went along the road. Normally when a Jewish leper was healed, he had to go to the local priest to confirm that he was now clean and permitted to mix among the general public. For the Samaritan, more was demanded. Most likely, he had to go to his own priest near Mount Gerizim. Yet this Samaritan shows greater amount of gratitude to the benefactor than the other Jewish people. Even though more was demanded of him, he was the only one to express gratitude for the gift of healing that he received.

It is interesting to note here that while the Jewish people normally did not mix with the Samaritans, misery brings them together. Here is an example of a great law of life: A common misfortune had broken down the racial and national barriers. In a common tragedy of their leprosy they had forgotten that they were Jews and Samaritans but people in need of help. If there is a flood in a country, wild animals congregate in a higher land for their safety and we will find animals which are natural enemies staying peacefully together. The Gospel tells us that out of those ten, the one who was a foreigner, a Samaritan, was the only one who returned to Jesus. His primary response was not first to thank Jesus, but first to glorify God and then thank Jesus. Even though Jesus did not look for gratitude from them or for any of the miracle he worked, yet as any human person he feels the insensitivity of the other nine who had easily forgotten the blessings they received.

In the ancient world, leprosy was considered a dreaded disease. The person with leprosy was segregated from the community and had to live outside the village or town in isolation. They depended on alms of some gift of food for their sustenance. They had to keep a distance from people at least fifty feet whenever they came out and if they saw anyone, they had to shout leper, leper, lest the other person is contaminated. Josephus tells us that they were treated as if they were dead persons and no one would keep contact with them. Leprosy kept a person totally marginalized from ordinary society until such a time as a priest would officially declare that the sufferer has been completely cured or healed. Hence the healing of the person was the restoration to new life and accepting him back into the society. In the gospel the lepers kept a distance and shouted for help from Jesus. They knew his name and knew his miracles and now they asked for the gift of healing.

No story in the gospel shows so emphatically the ingratitude of human persons. The ten lepers were gradually healed on the way and one of them the moment he realized that he was healed, realized that Jesus had healed him and returns to him before going to the priests to fulfil the obligation. He came and prostrated before Jesus, a sign of deepest respect and honour. Jesus expressed his surprise that the other nine did not come back to him to express their gratitude. The nine that did not come to him were his compatriots, the Jews. The one who returned is a Samaritan, a foreigner who did not hold on to the Jewish practices. Jesus highlights this fact by his own reaction. "Were not all ten made clean? The other nine, where are they? It seems that no one has come back to give praise to God, except this foreigner". This alien, this outsider and, by implication, this godless pagan, a person who is presumed to be far from God is the one who is most deeply aware of God's action in his life. Here the Lord appreciates his faith and the sense of gratitude. He was the one who came to express the gratitude, the person least expected to do so. He is now told to go his way and need not go to any one because of his great faith and trust. Yet Jesus is surprised that the other nine who were healed did not express their gratitude.

The incident of the ten lepers happened when Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, where he was to receive his cross and suffer for us. The gospel reminds us of the love, kindness and mercy of Jesus to all classes of people and the lepers are not excluded from it. However this makes us aware of the level of ingratitude to which human beings can sink. This is one of the many incidents of ingratitude that occurred during his public ministry and most of those miraculously cured refused to thank him. In today's miracle there was one who was least expected to return to thank as he was an outsider but had the decency to return to his benefactor with a word of gratitude. This act of the Samaritan did please Jesus but was surprised and sad at the ingratitude of others. All the ten had faith and confidence in Jesus that he could and would heal them of the dreaded disease. They were also very obedient and listened to his word to go to the priests. We can see the self-interest of the nine who did not return. They saw cleansing was their good fortune and the benefactor was forgotten. But the Samaritan felt it was his duty and returned to Jesus to thank him. Jesus now sends him back to his own people even without meeting the priests because it is his faith that has saved him from this disease.

The word of God today tells us that we all need to be grateful to God every day of our lives for the graces and good gifts we have received in and through him.

He has not only given us our life with all its joys and sorrows, but he has prepared us a future life of joy and happiness. We often fail to acknowledge the good he has done to us. What is needed in our life is the recognition of the good and the acknowledgement of gratitude towards God and all persons who come to us as instruments of God. It is necessary for us to express our thanks to the one who has done so much for us and does for us even now. Therefore our lives should be one of thanksgiving and at the same time one of thanks living. Like Naaman, the Samaritan, and Paul, we should acknowledge God's gifts and express our gratitude to him. On reflection this passage can say so much to us about our own lives. Leprosy, once such a terrifying disease has largely disappeared from many parts of the earth. But there are other situations like AIDS and other diseases together with poverty, immigrants and other unwanted people. As followers of Jesus, we need not only to be aware but to promote the dignity and rights of people who are "different" by reason of race, culture, religion or any physical or mental handicap. We need to see that for God there are absolutely no lepers, no outsiders. All are family, all have the same Father, all are his children, and all are brothers and sisters to each other.

We all are aware that we have been the recipients of gifts from God. In our life of faith an attitude of gratitude, that is to be thankful to God for everything he sends is essential and is a key to praying effectively. Our gratitude and words of thanks are indeed simple ways of showing appreciation for what we possess and all the blessings we have received. But the expression of gratitude is like all the other blessings must come from the depth of our hearts. Expressing an attitude of gratitude is more than giving words of thanks for the blessings. It is a way of living our life and being aware of how and why we are receiving these blessings. Being thankful to a person changes a person's life and his orientation. Our expression of gratitude for all that we have received transforms our life and we feel and think in terms of abundance. Today's word of God provides us with an opportunity to reflect upon our own disposition as we have received a gift of grace.

One night, at 11:30 p.m., an older African American Woman was standing on the side of an Alabama highway trying to endure a lashing rain storm. Her car had broken down and she desperately needed a ride. Soaking wet, she decided to flag down the next car. A young white man stopped to help her, generally unheard of in those conflict-filled 1960's. The man took her to safety, helped her get assistance and put her into a taxicab. She seemed to be in a big hurry, but wrote down his address and thanked him. Seven days went by and a

knock came on the man's door. To his surprise, a giant console colour TV was delivered to his home. A special note was attached. It read: "Thank you so much for assisting me on the highway the other night. The rain drenched not only my clothes, but also my spirits. Then you came along. Because of you, I was able to make it to my dying Husband's' bedside just before he passed away... God Bless you for helping me and unselfishly serving others." Sincerely, Mrs. Nat King Cole. (Nat King Cole was a great American Musician.)

Fr Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India