

Homily for the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

October 9, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: 2 Kings 5:14-17 (Naaman is cured of his leprosy.)

Responsory: Psalm 98 (The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.)

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 2:8-13 (If we have died with Christ, we will also live with him.)

Gospel: Luke 17:11-19 (Ten lepers are cured; one returns to give thanks.)

Leprosy was one of the most feared diseases on the planet until the advent of antibiotics finally made it curable. It was not only painful, disfiguring and fatal, but also *contagious*. So, anyone even *suspected* of having leprosy had to be removed from society, to protect everyone else. Unfortunately, some minor skin diseases could be mistaken for the early stages of leprosy. It was the *priest*, not a skilled physician, who had to decide whether an afflicted person posed a danger or not. If the priest judged him to be “unclean,” then he would be banished to live a lonely and miserable existence out in the wilderness, accompanied only by other lepers. But, if the lesion cleared up, because it wasn’t leprosy after all, then the person could return and present himself to the priest, who could declare him “clean” and welcome him back into the community.

Today’s first reading and gospel both feature lepers who find healing. However, in both stories, the main message is found not in the miraculous cleansing itself, but in the act of *faith* which precedes the healing and the act of *thanksgiving* which follows it.

Naaman, a prominent Syrian general, travels all the way to Israel, because a Jewish slave girl tells him that there is a prophet there who might be able to cure him. As we heard in the reading, when Naaman follows Elisha’s instructions, plunging seven times into the Jordan River, he *is*, in fact, cleansed of his leprosy. However, in the earlier part of the story, which we did *not* hear today, Naaman nearly misses his chance to be healed, because of his lack of *faith*. He expects the Prophet to wave his hand over the leprous spot on his body and call upon God to heal him. If it works, then Naaman will put his faith in this God of Israel who has cured him. If nothing happens, then he’ll go home disappointed and continue to worship the gods of his people, as before. But, Elisha refuses to call upon his God in Naaman’s presence. Instead, he sends Naaman off to wash in the Jordan, forcing him to put his faith in God *before* the cure takes place. If he does not believe that God can do it, he will not be cured.

Jesus does something similar with the ten lepers who approach him. Unlike in other stories, where Jesus reaches out and touches a leper to cure him instantly, here he sends them *away before* they are healed. He tells them to go and show themselves to the priests, as if they have already been cleansed. So, just as Naaman had to believe in the word spoken to him by the Prophet Elisha, these lepers are forced to put their faith in Jesus’ word and go as instructed. Luke doesn’t say how long they walk before being healed. For all we know, they could have been well on their way to their destination. But, eventually, their faith is rewarded. All of them are cleansed.

The thanksgiving which is offered *after* the healings is also a critical part of both stories. In fact, it seems to be the main focus. However, there is a subtle difference between the stories which is easily missed. It has to do with *who* is being thanked. Naaman returns to thank *Elisha* and tries to offer *him* a gift in exchange for his healing. Elisha adamantly refuses, because he knows that he is not responsible for curing the general. The thanks belongs to *God*, not to his Prophet, who only acted as an intermediary. It's not clear whether Naaman fully grasps this distinction, but it's very important to Elisha. He knows that it is blasphemous to claim that a mere human being, like himself, can accomplish the mighty works of God. Failing to persuade Elisha to accept a gift, Naaman then correctly directs his thanks, and even his *worship*, to the One who really deserves them. In a symbolic gesture, he takes two mule-loads of earth home with him to Syria, so that he can worship the God of Israel on *Israeli soil*, even in his native land.

In the gospel, the distinction between thanking God and thanking Jesus is totally erased. The cured leper falls at Jesus' feet to thank *him*, and Jesus comments that this was the only one of the ten to return and give thanks *to God*. So, thanks to Jesus and thanks to God are the same, just as *faith* in Jesus and faith in God are the same. For, unlike the Prophet Elisha, Jesus does not merely speak with God's authority; he *embodies* God's power and authority, as well as his mercy. The Father and the Son are truly one.

These two foreigners who experience God's healing power have much to teach us. Usually, the healing that we seek is not a cure for a *physical* disease, but some other form of healing which requires the help of divine grace – for example, freedom from an addiction or some other destructive and deeply ingrained habit, or some type of spiritual growth which has eluded us, despite our best efforts. These biblical stories remind us to approach the Lord *with faith*. We can't *bargain* with God, saying, "You do this for me and I'll put my faith in you from now on." That's what Naaman had in mind, but Elisha would not let him get away with it. We must place our trust in the Lord *before* he acts, not just *after* our prayers have been answered. Just scan through the gospels and see how many times Jesus says to a person, "Your *faith* has saved you." It's a common theme, and one that bears much reflection.

Just as important as *approaching* God with faith is *returning* to God with thanksgiving. In the gospel, Jesus says, "Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine?" How sad! But, how common, too! Far too often, we fail to give thanks for the marvels that God has worked for us, usually because *we do not perceive what God has done*. In the case of habits or addictions that have been overcome, we may attribute our success to sheer willpower, failing to recognize that God even played a role in our healing. In the case of spiritual healing, our growth might be so gradual that we don't even perceive that a meaningful change has occurred. It's hard to give thanks unless we *notice* a change and understand that God is responsible for it. That's why it's good to reflect from time to time on how the Lord's healing hand has touched us, so that we can return and give thanks, knowing that our *faith* has saved us.