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OCTOBER 13, 2019

Sunday of the 28th Week of Ordinary Time

Year C

2 Kgs 5:14-17

Ps 98:1,2-4

2 Tm 2:8-13

Lk 17:11-19

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“Gratitude is the memory of the heart.” It is shocking to read that only one of the ten lepers healed by Jesus came back to say “thank you.” Being grateful is not just a social duty that we share, but an expression of our interiority that also becomes a spiritual act.

The Gospel story of the healing of the ten lepers may have been modeled on the Old Testament story of the cure of Naaman. The commander of the Syrian army, Naaman, is a great man, a trusted advisor of the king and a brave warrior, but he is afflicted by leprosy, the most feared disease in the ancient world. It takes a little girl, an Israeli prisoner of war, to help this “great man” discover how to heal. He will be cured, the unnamed girl tells Naaman’s wife, if he goes to “the prophet in Samaria” (2 Kgs 5:3). Naaman must first ask permission from the king of Aram, who tells him to present himself to the king of Israel with his letter. Taking with him some gifts, Naaman travels to Israel with the letter, which the king of Israel misunderstands. Thinking that the king of Aram intended to provoke him, the king of Israel tears his clothes in anger. The prophet Elisha, hearing of this, invites the king to send him the sick man: “Let him come to me and find out that there is a prophet in Israel” (2 Kgs 5:8). Personal encounter and recognition are essential for the commander’s recovery. Naaman arrives at the home of Elisha, with an impressive retinue. And in keeping with his

status as army commander, he expects a more elaborate healing ritual than Elisha calls for. But the prophet, without going out to meet him, sends him a messenger to indicate what to do: wash seven times in the river Jordan (a prophetic sign of our baptism). It is too simple for Naaman to believe. Should he not meet the prophet personally? Do not they have better rivers in Damascus? The narrative suggests that one part is being cured while another is being healed. The cure is physical; the healing is internal. Naaman, though indignant, obeys. When he realizes he is healed, he comes back to Elisha to thank him, offering gifts as a sign of gratitude. This is where he finally meets the prophet in person. Total healing, true conversion, is the result of his obedience to the word of the prophet, of his personal encounter with him, and of the sacramental mediation of the water of the river Jordan. It is an encounter that leads him to recognize the God of Israel.

In the Gospel reading, Luke allows us to encounter again the figure of the stranger, as we follow Jesus on his journey. This journey has as its geographical goal Jerusalem, but its existential end is the offering of his life on the cross, the sign of the limitless availability of the Son for the Father and his work of universal salvation. Jesus is headed for Jerusalem, the “holy city,” but to get there he passes through territories that the Jews considered too close to foreigners (the so-called “Galilee of the Gentiles”) or even impure because they were inhabited by heretics (the population of Samaria).

It is precisely along this risky route that Jesus meets a group of people who were among the most marginalized of the time: lepers (such as Naaman the Syrian). Leprosy was a skin disease that was considered a punishment for sinners (see King Uzziah in 2 Chr 26:20). It was believed to make its victims unfit for worship or for living among the community, so they were forced to live apart from the rest of society (see Lv 13:46). Lepers were excluded, forced to wander in solitude, accompanied only by other lepers, always calling out ahead of them when they approached inhabited areas. They were also humiliated by the fact that they had to wear ragged clothes with their heads uncovered.

A group of ten lepers goes to meet Jesus. They ask for help, approaching as they would have been expected to: from a distance. All they had were their voices, and they used them to call out to Jesus: “Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!” (Lk 17:13). In calling Jesus “Master,” they address him as disciples would. Jesus sees them and gives them his attention, asking them to carry out a specific action: “Go show yourselves to the priests” (Lk 17:14). In Israel, it was the priests were responsible for diagnosing both the appearance and the disappearance of the disease (see Lv 13:9-10; 14:2).

Approaching Jesus, the ten lepers kept their distance. This was because of the quarantine based on the purity laws (see Lv 13:45-46). It can also be to show us that these sick people – who, like the Gentiles, were considered “far off” (Acts 2:39) – despite the traumatic shame of their condition, are about to receive the call of God. It is a detail aimed at teaching us that God is the one who takes initiative and bridges distances. The lepers turn to Jesus as “Master” rather than with the title “Lord,” and this can reveal that their faith in Jesus is at this point only preliminary. They beg him for mercy and they obey his command, but they fail to perceive the true meaning of their healing.

Luke emphasizes the fact that Jesus “saw” the ten lepers as he responded to their plea. Luke, elsewhere in his Gospel, also links “seeing” to “saving” (see, for example, Luke 13:12). In this initial encounter, healing does not take place immediately, as in the case of Naaman. Faithful to the Torah, Jesus orders the lepers to present themselves to the priests (see Lk 17:14). Healing, therefore, would imply listening to the word of Jesus and, as in the case of Naaman, also being grateful to the healer. Nine of the lepers, although they had the good intention of obeying Jesus’ instruction and the privilege of meeting him in person, are unable to take the greatest risk: to return to Jesus. Only one of them does, a Samaritan who is therefore an “enemy.” But “realizing” (or as some translations put it, “seeing”) that he is healed, he returns to Jesus (see Lk 17:15). For Luke, his “seeing” means that the eyes of the Samaritan’s faith have been opened. Now it is a matter

of making a personal decision towards that faith, and this happens when he decides to “return” to Jesus. The impassioned glorification of God by the stranger, who throws himself at the feet of the Master to thank him, indicates that in this second personal encounter with Jesus the Samaritan is not simply paying a debt of gratitude, but experiences a total healing and an inner transformation. Gratitude is normally expressed to God; this is the only instance in the New Testament where such gratitude is addressed to Jesus. In the end, the stranger, whose faith in Jesus transformed him, is ready to be sent on a mission: “Stand up and go” (Lk 17:19, see also Lk 10:3).

The healing of Naaman and that of the ten lepers are both stories anchored to the theme of inner conversion that happens through a personal encounter with God. This encounter takes place starting from a personal crisis, as a serious illness can be, and it is a divine initiative. It is up to the person to take the next step of recognizing and welcoming the meaning of this meeting that will lead to conversion.

Healing is possible only for those in whom physical cure and gratitude intertwine; healing of the body and conversion of the heart intersect. The water of the Jordan River and the reference to the priests highlight the importance of sacramental action in the work of salvation. This is not a simple cure, individual and abstract in nature. From being separated and excluded, we are reconciled integrally with ourselves, in our bodies, and with the community, because we are reconciled in the depths of our hearts with God, by God in Jesus Christ through the action of the Church. As with Naaman and the leprous Samaritan, only those who undergo this experience of purifying and reconciling communion can be reintegrated into the community and sent on mission.

The mission of the Church brings and communicates the saving grace of God because it recreates men and women from the destruction of sin, from the separation of death. Welcoming the Gospel means entering into the Paschal Mystery of Christ, accepting his re-creating death and contem-

plating his fidelity in the resurrection. Reborn in the baptismal font, the Church's new Jordan River, and grateful for the undeserved salvation, we are made missionaries in the ordinary experiences of life: get up, go your way, return to your home. Others will be chosen to be missionary disciples in foreign, and perhaps hostile and pagan, lands: the Galilee of the Gentiles, the Samaria of the heretics, and the Syria of the pagans.

