

SERMON – TRINITY 17 (Luke 17.11-19)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today's gospel passage illustrates two of the greatest themes in the ministry and mission of Jesus: The first is the vital importance and value of thanksgiving, of gratitude to God the Father. The second theme is Jesus' radical inclusion of Gentiles, non-Jews, foreigners within the scope of God's grace and Kingdom.

Ten men with leprosy are healed but only one returns and gives thanks. Giving thanks to God is a wonderful, life-sustaining habit . As the Psalmist said, "O give thanks to the LORD for he is good, his mercy endures forever." I will return to the implications of this man's gratitude to God, shortly.

At today's point in Luke's narrative, Jesus has determined to go to Jerusalem. He is in the region between Samaria and Galilee. Jesus frequents boundary spaces and he is about to challenge again two major social and religious boundaries by his association with ... **lepers** and with ... a **Samaritan**.

As Jesus enters a village, ten lepers approach, calling out to him but keeping their distance because they were considered physically and ritually unclean. The lepers acknowledge Jesus as *master*, a term used in every other instance in the gospel of Luke by the disciples. Jesus immediately sends them to show themselves to the priests to confirm their healing, and on the way, they are in fact made clean.

Jewish law forbade any contact with lepers. The disease was considered to be a sign of God's strong judgement on sinful people, even a symbol of sinfulness. Yet Jesus went out of his way to cleanse lepers. It was a mark of his mission. In chapter 7 (v. 22), Jesus responded to the messengers whom John the Baptist had sent to Jesus to ask him if he was the awaited Messiah. He responded with the words, "Go and tell John, ... the lepers are cleansed."

Today's episode also evokes the story of Naaman the Syrian, whom we read about in today's Old Testament passage, and whom Jesus mentioned in his inaugural sermon in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, recorded in chapter 4 of Luke's gospel. Jesus' attention to outsiders and marginalized people was evident from the start of his ministry, and he highlighted it in that first speech. In response, his hometown audience tried to throw him off a cliff! The inclusive, welcoming ways of God are not always accepted by everyone. As in the story of Naaman the Syrian, the recipient of healing and grace in today's passage is a foreigner.

After the healing of the ten lepers, the focus narrows down to one of the ten, the one who alone turns back glorifying God and prostrating himself at Jesus' feet, thanking him. Only after he has expressed his profound gratitude do we learn that the one who has turned back in this borderland is ... a Samaritan.

The relationship between Jews and Samaritans at the time of Jesus was conflicted and sometimes violent. Centuries before they had been one people, but changes and tensions wrought by exile and return put them at odds regarding beliefs about scripture, worship, and what it meant to be holy.

That history of hostility may explain why, in Luke chapter 9, James and John suggested firebombing a Samaritan settlement after its inhabitants refused to let Jesus and his disciples rest overnight in their village. James and John said to Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them”? Jesus firmly rebuked their violent request.

Samaritans were despised, marginalised outsiders in Jesus’ day. Yet Jesus always welcomed them. We see this especially in the parable in Luke chapter 10, in which it is a Samaritan, and not one of the respectable religious people, who demonstrates love for his neighbour by showing mercy to a wounded stranger.

Our world desperately needs this message of God’s loving, healing inclusiveness. Contemporary politics in so many countries is characterised by a deliberate demonisation of the outsider, the foreigner, the “Other”, whoever is not “one of us”. This practice is for selfish, base political gain. I have no doubt that Jesus grieves over the conscious cultivation and manipulation of mistrust, division and hatred by today’s leaders. God’s Church stands as a counter-testimony of the love of Jesus, in the face of such cynical, self-serving cruelty.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians that we all were once strangers to God’s promises and his covenant, yet the blood of Jesus shed on the cross has reconciled us to God and to one another. Being a living testimony of loving welcome to strangers, foreigners, the excluded and the marginalised is a huge part of our calling as a church.

Let's see how the two big themes of gratitude and inclusion come together in today's story. The accounts of Naaman and the Samaritan leper share many details in common. Both stories refer to Samaria and concern healing from leprosy. Both Naaman, a Syrian, and the Samaritan were foreigners, both were outsiders to the people of God. In fact, Naaman was a commander of an army that opposed Israel. Even so, God healed each man from leprosy, despite their enemy/outsider status, and God did so before they pledged any allegiance to him. Both were healed from afar, without being touched. Both returned to the source of their healing with thanksgiving, and both were sent along their way with a command to "Go."

After the Samaritan *saw* that he was healed, the rest of his response is characterized by four verbs, recorded in verses 15 and 16: "turn back", "praise" (or "give glory"), "prostrate" (literally "fall on his face"), and "give thanks". Jesus highlights the first two verbs by repetition: "Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Return and *praise* play significant roles in Luke's gospel. At Jesus' birth the shepherds "returned", glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen ... " (2:20). After witnessing Jesus' ascension, in the last two verses of Luke's gospel, the disciples "worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the Temple blessing God." (24:52)

Return and *praise* frame this gospel, suggesting a road map for our response to God's activity in our world.

The passage ends with a command to the Samaritan: "Get up (*anistemi*; rise) and go (*poreuomai*) on your way; your faith has made you well." When it appears in Luke and Acts, the phrase "get up and go," suggests that a

significant, even wondrous, change is about to occur. After the annunciation, for example, Mary “gets up and goes” to Elizabeth (1:39). The prodigal son decides to “get up and go” back to his father (15:18), and God tells Paul to “get up and go” to Damascus (Acts 22:10; cf. Acts 9:11; 10:20).

The command to get up and go comes with a promise to the Samaritan: “your faith has made you well (literally *saved you*).” The good news of this encounter carries with it the promise that through Jesus, God empowers people to step across boundaries, share mercy with outsiders, pay attention to things worthy of praise and move forward into God’s future with assurance that there is more to God’s story than meets the eye. For that, may we always give thanks.