

Sunday, Oct. 13, 2013
Conventual Mass

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
The Grateful Samaritan

A teacher once asked her class, “Which is more important – the sun or the moon?” “Why, the moon, of course,” said little Mary (it could have been little Johnny). “Why do you say that?” asked the teacher. “Well,” said Mary, “the moon gives us light at night when we really need it, while the sun gives us light during the day, when we really don’t need it.” When we think about it, the child’s attitude towards the sun may mirror our attitude at times towards God and God’s gifts to us. Mary/ Johnny took daylight for granted, forgetting that it came from the sun. In a similar way we can take God’s love and graces for granted, forgetting that our very life and all that we have come from God.¹ Our Father Anselm Strittmater, used to say that the problem with Christianity today is that people have been inoculated against it so that they won’t catch the real thing. Although Fr. Anselm’s saying is not the same as that in our story, it does point out that a deep understanding and appreciation of God’s work in us lead to an ever deepening relationship with God.

In our reading from Kings we find that the Syrian general, Naaman, has been healed of leprosy. The Syrians were not only a foreign pagan peoples but probably at that time hostile to Israel as well. The verses previous to our reading tell us that the prophet Elisha did not address Naaman in person but sent a messenger to tell him to wash in the Jordan. And Naaman was enraged. After all his travels and struggles to get there he expected something dramatic, preferably with incantations and the laying on of hands. It took all the energy of his attendants to convince Naaman to at least try what the prophet had commanded him to do. When Naaman came up out of the Jordan he was rewarded for his obedience. He was not only cleansed of his leprosy, but converted to faith in the God of Israel: “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel.” And because at that time it was thought that a deity was attached to a particular land, Naaman carted off some earth from Israel so that he could erect an altar on it and offer sacrifice to God in his homeland. With his departure, Naaman disappears from the pages of Scripture and of history. I am sure, however, that his encounter with God through Elisha marked him as a grateful and changed man for the rest of his life. A pagan had been called out of the darkness into the light to become a disciple of Israel’s God. His conversion was to be a foreshadowing of the universal call to faith and salvation.

Some eight hundred years later, Jesus traveled through Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem where he would be crucified. Because of the religiously mixed population and lack of orthodox observance of some of its inhabitants, the area’s population was looked down upon by more orthodox Jews.² We need only think of Nathaniel’s retort to Philip: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth” (Jhn 1:46?)

As Jesus was about to enter a village, ten lepers called out to him from a distance

as required by law. Hoping against hope, these outcasts called out to Jesus: “Jesus, Master,! Have pit on us!”

It is rare in the gospels that Jesus is called by his name. Usually he is addressed as “rabbi” or “teacher.” Jesus is called by his name only three times in the gospels: when the blind man at Jericho entreats him for his sight, here, and when the Good Thief says: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 23:42). There is a connection here: Diseases were thought to be the result of sin and the crucified man was executed for his sin. Jesus’ response to the Good Thief: “This day you will be with me in paradise” and what he said to the now cured leper indicate that prayer leads to salvation and opens the way to the kingdom.³

Luke also uses the word “Master” to refer to Jesus’ omnipotence: Peter at the miraculous catch of fish, and on the mountain of transfiguration, the apostles’ plea for help during a storm, and John’s astonishment at seeing someone cast out demons who does not belong to the twelve.⁴

Jesus simply told the lepers: “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” Unlike Naaman who was at first disappointed by a lack of gesturers, the ten simply headed for the required examination and reentry into their communities. How rich is their faith as exemplified by their words and actions! They did not receive their healing while speaking to Jesus but on the way in obedience to his word. Obedience to the Word leads to wholeness and salvation.

But only one returned to give thanks. I don’t think the other nine were ungrateful. They must have been very joyful people,

But first things first: first the examination by whoever had charge of these things, and then reunion with their families and loved ones. As understandable as it all is, it was, shall we say, rather self centered. There was no thought of the source of their healing.

The Samaritan’s return is dramatic, energetic and whole hearted: “He returned, glorifying God in a loud voice, and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him.” Glorifying God, falling prostrate at Jesus’ feet, speaking his praises are all liturgical stances. “Rise,” associated with “your faith has saved you,” is more than merely getting up from the ground. It is reminiscent of being raised from the dead, from death to sin and to a life that comes to those who believe in Christ.⁵

“Your faith has saved you.” This account of the cleansing/ healing of the lepers is about faith and the universal call to salvation. This theme is emphasized in Luke. Both in the gospels and in Acts he insists on this universal call. Often he points out in his gospel that Jesus himself announced the good news, if not in pagan territory, at least in areas with mixed population and that non-Jews also benefited from his miracles (the cure of the centurion’s slave immediately comes to mind). The book of Acts ends with the declaration of Paul: “Let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles...”⁶ And we the recipients of this great gift must always be thankful.

Faith is an absolutely free gift of God. In no way can we earn any of God’s gifts to us. All of God’s gifts to us, life itself, flow from God’s great love for us, and it is in the

mystery of God's love for us that we find the answer to the whys of the Word who became incarnate and gave all for us, even his own life.

Gratitude like love leads us outwards and to even greater love. Lack of thankfulness, like a lack of love closes us in on ourselves. Gratitude will open our horizons into an ever deepening faith, an ever deepening love, an ever closer following in the footsteps of Jesus, the Lord.

Like Mary or Johnny, we may become so used to the life giving gifts of God that we neglect their Author. A heartfelt spirit of gratitude will not only deepen our own faith but enable us to share that faith with the world.

End Notes

- ¹ Mark Link, Challenge 2000, A Daily Meditation Program Based on The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius (Allen, Tx, Tabor Publishing, 1993) 128
- ² Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v. 6 Ordinary Time, Year C (Collegeville, Minn., Liturgical Press, 1991)) 254
- ³ Days of the Lord 254
- ⁴ Days of the Lord 254
- ⁵ Days of the Lord 255
- ⁶ Days of the Lord 256