

Homily 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C 9th October 2016

I always saw the Gospel account of Jesus healing the ten lepers as a reminder to thank God for His goodness. As important as being thankful is, the account is much more than that. This week's readings build on the theme of faith from last week and lead us into an encounter with God. There are a couple things we need to understand before we can unpack today's readings.

The first concerns lepers. In biblical times any skin blemish was considered leprosy. When a priest diagnosed a person with leprosy that person was considered ritually unclean. Lepers were banished from the community until they were cured. As an aside, it is interesting to note that in his commentary on today's gospel Fr Geoffrey Plant says that neither biblical nor medical scholars have found any evidence for the disease we refer to as leprosy in first century Palestine. Leprosy is a disease that is normally found in the tropics. The ten people Jesus met on that road were complete outcast, the dregs of society.

The second thing we need to understand is the relationship between Jews and Samaritans. We sometimes think the relationship between Jews and Samaritans was like say the way Australians and New Zealanders see each other as friendly rivals. Not so, the Jews thought of the Samaritans as vile creatures, the result of intermarriage between the Assyrian invaders and Jews of the Northern Kingdom some 800 years before Christ.

Jesus in today's gospel is not just going for a stroll through the byways of Galilee. He is in the Bad Lands. An area inhabited by society's outcasts, the ritually unclean, those deemed by society as unworthy of an encounter of any form with God. What is Jesus doing there? He is deliberately looking for the ritually unclean; He is seeking out encounters with them in their own Bad Lands. As I spoke last week of my faith being a total gift from God, so are my encounters with God. Encounters with God are on God's terms not mine. However, God is constantly seeking me out, I just need to be constantly aware of that.

A pilgrim asks a monk: How can I encounter God? To which the monk replies: You have as much chance of

encountering God as you have of making the sun rise. Dismayed the pilgrim asks: What use then is my pilgrimage and prayer life? Ah! Says the monk; that is so that when the sun does rises you don't miss it.

You see my encounters with God are on God's terms not mine but my response is totally up to me. In our first reading from Kings when Naaman the leper is cleansed by bathing seven times in the Jordan he realises that through the prophet Elisha he has encountered a power greater than anything he has ever experienced. Naaman exclaims there is no God on earth except in Israel. Naaman then proceeds to honour the God of Israel. In contrast in today's Gospel the nine Jewish lepers fail to recognise Jesus curing them as an encounter with God but simply dismiss their cure as good fortune and go on their way. They are no longer outcasts; they simply slipped back into daily life. They do not recognise that a miracle has occurred; their lack of faith has caused them to miss the sun rise. The only one of the ten who recognised their cure as an encounter with God, a miracle, was a Samaritan. Jesus' response to the Samaritan is quite important. Jesus does not say: "I have cured you" but "your faith has saved you". All ten lepers were cured

but only one was “saved”, the Samaritan whose faith allowed him to see his cure as a miracle, an encounter with God.

It’s difficult for us to appreciate how disturbing this passage in Luke would be to first century Jewish ears. Don’t get me wrong when I say this; in a modern context it would be as if Luke was saying Jesus cured nine Christians and a member of the Taliban and only the Taliban understood what had happened. Luke’s underlying message is that God is constantly seeking the outsider. It’s the person who is at rock bottom who has written themselves off, the person with nowhere to go, whom God calls the loudest.

God meets you at a place and time of his choosing in the unexpected, in life’s Bad Lands, the times when you question yourself. I recall when I was first ordained as a Deacon I was very nervous and unsure of myself, I still am many times. Anyway, I made some mistakes in a Mass at another Church and I was told in no uncertain terms, by a friend I respected, that I was not a good ‘advertisement’ for the Deaconate. I was shattered. The next morning I talked it over with Fr Peter who reassured me that all would be well, but I

was full of doubt. Following my conversation with Fr Peter I left for Blacktown Hospital full of doubt, questions and a good degree of anger. In the first ward I visited I met a man who had just been told that in all probability he would never walk again. I sat with him for a time and he said to me the most profound thing. He said: "I know I'll be in a wheel chair, I know that God has allowed this to happen, what's really important is I understand what God wants me to do with this gift". This man was not angry with God; he saw his life as a gift. He simply wanted to know what God was calling him to. My grandfather had a beautiful saying "It's not important what happens to you in life but how you respond to it." The man's faith filled response to what others would see as a total tragedy filled me in awe. I gave him communion and as we sat there I felt all my doubt, questions and anger drain away. It was like a good mate had put his hand on my shoulder and said: I'm okay you're okay. The patient said to me; I have no idea why I said that to you. I simply said thanks and if we meet again I'll try and explain what it meant to me. The conversation I had with that patient challenged me to ask the question: "What's the message in my friend's criticism,

where is God calling me.” You see we encounter God in the actions of others around us and we need to realise that God acts in the world through us. We need to recognise when the sun rises in our lives and we need to thank God and celebrate every one of them.

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