

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our God and Redeemer.

Jesus says, 'Your faith has made you well!'

Dear Friends,

Two of today's readings are about the sickness of leprosy. In biblical times it was an incurable sickness and because it was and is extremely infectious the lepers lived and live apart from the community.

It might come as a surprise to hear that it is not dangerous to touch a leper. Saint Elisabeth of Thüringen and Mother Theresa of Calcutta both bathed lepers and they were not infected. It is the leper's saliva and their white nasal discharge that carry the virus.

After this hard introduction, let us have a dark joke. In the leper colony, the arm of a sick person fell off. He took it with his other arm and threw it over the wall. Another leper asked: Hey brother! Do you want to escape?

Joking aside, let us first look at today's Old Testament reading. I won't focus on Naaman being sick and his wonderful healing, but rather on another element of the story Naaman's expectations.

I can imagine the scene, when Elisha told Naaman: Go and wash in the river Jordan seven times... That's all?! He thinks to himself. I could do this at home and there are better rivers than the Jordan. By the way dear have you ever seen the Jordan river? I saw just one photo. It is not a river, where I would wish to wash myself. Of course, for us the Jordan is a spiritual place, because the Lord was baptized in it. Anyway, I can agree with Naaman, who had a different expectation concerning the solution to his predicament.

Is it a familiar story, isn't it? How often do we ask the Lord to help us and if the Lord's plan doesn't fit our expectation we say, God doesn't want to help me. To use a mundane example. I ask: Lord I want to be rich! And he sends people and opportunities, but I don't welcome or receive them these gifts because I am expecting to find a treasure chest waiting for me when I get home.

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.' (Is 55.8-9)

God's plans are more perfect than our expectations. We need to learn to be attentive to God's plans for us and live by the words we pray every day (I hope every day...) 'Thy will be done'.

Now let us look at the Gospel set for today. I would like first to clarify a few points. The first is about the lepers 'keeping their distance'. Behind this scene there stands a commandment in the Law, the Torah found in Leviticus (chapter 13 verses 45,46). 'The person who has the leprous disease shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.' So these ten people

were forbidden by the Law because they are unclean to approach Jesus that is why they are keeping their distance.

The other point is Jesus' command that the lepers show themselves to the priests. Why is this important? Jesus is making sure that these people are returned to the fullness of community life. Until the priest gives a green light these people remain unclean. The entirety of chapter 14 of Leviticus is concerned with this topic. What we need to see is that Jesus takes care of these people. They don't only have an experience with him, but he also restores them to the community.

The ten lepers called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" This petition is one of the earliest Christian prayers, and to my mind they are choosing the best way. This passage reminds us of how we should approach the Master. If we today have this attitude of mind Jesus, the Master is ready and willing to have mercy on us and grant us his love. Then Jesus gives them a command, which they follow and as they depart they are cleansed.

I have a habit, before I preach I always check the Gospel in Greek, perhaps I can find some difficulty or a deeper understanding. And now my discovery was successful. ἰδὼν ὅτι ἰάθη means 'saw that he was healed'. But not just simply healed, because the verb ἰάομαι has more than one meaning, how beautiful these meanings are: heals, makes complete, liberates you from sins and mistakes, brings redemption.

The other nine lepers did not make a mistake, when they followed Jesus' commandment and showed themselves to the priest. But if it is not a mistake, what is the difference between the one who gave thanks and the other nine?

Of course the answer thanksgiving. He didn't forget to say thank seeing that he was healed. I think all of us at some time or other have forgotten to say thank you, until we fully comprehend the gift given. But why is it so important to say thank when God fulfills my expectations? As Paul taught us in the letter to the Philippians: 'in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.' (Philippians 4.6) We see, Paul also encourage us to give thanks with all our prayer, because this can elevate us to avail an higher level on healing and in the relationship with God.

The other difference between the one who gives thanks and the nine others is the level of the healing. He is not just healed, but he is made whole (complete). He is liberated from his sins and mistakes. The other nine receive the gift, they asked for, but this one receives a more perfect gift. Let me try and explain what is meant.

We receive our completeness from God, but we are not simply passive partakers of God's action but we should do what we can, and the first step is always to give thanks. It sounds so easy and self-evident, but it is so useful to remind ourselves just how important giving thanks is at all times Paul reminds us

When we ask something from the Lord that is an act of the faith. I ask and I believe he will help. However, when I give thanks that is an act of love. Out of love, I give thanks to the Lord. Jesus says at the end of today's Gospel: your faith has made you well. Why is not the act of love that makes him whole?

At the seminary I attended in Hungary I had a classmate, who loved and still loves to discuss. On one occasion we were discussing this very sentence of Jesus: your faith has made you well.

And I argued for faith and he argued for love. Both of our arguments were understandable and satisfying, but at the end we came to the same conclusion concerning these two virtues of the triad: faith, hope and love. Arguing whether faith or love is more important is like arguing whether a person needs a right or left leg for walking.

For completeness, we need both right and left legs, we need the gift of faith and the act of love always ready to ask and to give thanks.

The verb that the Gospel used, when the lepers give thanks is εὐχαριστῶν. From this verb comes the word Eucharist. So today I want to encourage all of us to give thanks and say a big thank you to the Lord at this Eucharist, at this thanksgiving service, as we take Communion or we are blessed. At the end the service all of us can leave the Church with the sentence in our hearts: Your faith has made you well. Amen. Not sure about your conclusion given how it is presently phrased.