

Today's gospel story is commonly known as "The Healing (or Cleansing) of the Ten Lepers". Does this title capture the point of the story? It puts the focus on Jesus' healing powers. A case could be made to call it "The Return of the Grateful Leper" if it's about gratitude. Or again, "The Surprising Samaritan" if it's really about ethnic and religious prejudice.

Without excluding any of these possibilities, let's take the opportunity to reflect on gratitude. Thankfulness lies at the very heart of the Christian life. The core ritual that grounds our faith, the eucharist, derives its name from the Greek word for thanksgiving. When we participate heart and soul in Sunday eucharist we are being exercised in the ways of thankfulness.

It is fair to say that we need this weekly practice of gratitude. It helps us withstand the constant barrage of advertising that appeals to our discontent. Advertising keeps scratching away at our fears and false needs. It reminds us incessantly of what we don't have and what we must have in order to be happy. The best way to "inoculate" ourselves from this ever-threatening virus is to surrender ourselves to the spirit of thankfulness that roams free when we gather to break bread with the Lord. And to pray every day for "our daily bread", that is, just what we need for today, no more, no less.

A reading from the second book of the Kings 5:14-17

Naaman the leper went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, as Elisha had told him to do. And his flesh became clean once more like the flesh of a little child.

Returning to Elisha with his whole escort, he went in and stood before him. 'Now I know' he said 'that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel. Now, please, accept a present from your servant.' But Elisha replied, 'As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing.' Naaman pressed him to accept, but he refused. Then Naaman said, 'Since your answer is "No," allow your servant to be given as much earth as two mules may carry, because your servant will no longer offer holocaust or sacrifice to any god except the Lord.'

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 97:1-4

R. The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.

Sing a new song to the Lord
for he has worked wonders.
His right hand and his holy arm
have brought salvation. R.

The Lord has made known his salvation;
has shown his justice to the nations.
He has remembered his truth and love
for the house of Israel. R.

All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.
Shout to the Lord all the earth,
ring out your joy. R.

First Reading

The exploits of Elijah and Elisha are vividly described in the two books of the Kings. The story of the healing of Naaman is a fine example. The complete account of the event takes up the whole of chapter 5 in 2 Kings and readers would both enjoy and benefit from reading the whole story.

The congregation, unfortunately, only gets to hear a very short extract. They join the story mid-way, so they do not hear that Naaman was a high-ranking military officer of a foreign power. Nor do they know that, stricken with leprosy, he was persuaded by a captive Jewish girl to seek healing from Elisha, the prophet of Samaria. Nor that at first he was offended by Elisha's directive to wash in the river Jordan and had to be persuaded to do so.

The point of the story is not so much Elisha's prophetic power to heal as the remarkable conversion of a powerful foreigner. The fact that Naaman came to faith in the God of Israel, and took soil from the land back with him on which to build a shrine to the true God, would have had special significance for the Israelites exiled in Babylon. The reading itself is a lively combination of narrative and dialogue that should allow readers to proclaim it easily enough with energy. The problem for the congregation is the lack of context.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 97/98 is a hymn of praise to God as a victorious warrior-king. The response, adapted from a verse of the psalm, connects directly with the first reading. The verses go on to declare that the wonders God has worked for his people Israel have demonstrated his saving power to all peoples. The conviction that Israel has been chosen by God for the salvation of the whole world appears repeatedly in the Old Testament.

The spirit of the psalm is self-evidently one of exultant praise. In their delivery readers will need to take care not to rush through the short lines. It will be better to respect the form in which the verses have been laid out.

A reading from the second letter of St Paul to Timothy 2:8-13

Remember the Good News that I carry, 'Jesus Christ risen from the dead, sprung from the race of David'; it is on account of this that I have my own hardships to bear, even to being chained like a criminal – but they cannot chain up God's news. So I bear it all for the sake of those who are chosen, so that in the end they may have the salvation that is in Christ Jesus and the eternal glory that comes with it.

Here is a saying that you can rely on:

If we have died with him, then we shall live with him.
If we hold firm, then we shall reign with him.
If we disown him, then he will disown us.
We may be unfaithful, but he is always faithful,
for he cannot disown his own self.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered one of the villages, ten lepers came to meet him. They stood some way off and called to him, 'Jesus! Master! Take pity on us.' When he saw them he said, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' Now as they were going away they were cleansed. Finding himself cured, one of them turned back praising God at the top of his voice and threw himself at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. The man was a Samaritan. This made Jesus say, 'Were not all ten made clean? The other nine, where are they? It seems that no one has come back to give praise to God, except this foreigner.' And he said to the man, 'Stand up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you.'

Second Reading

This passage from 2 Timothy has a variety of elements. There's a succinct statement summing up the gospel ('Jesus Christ risen from the dead, sprung from the race of David'), followed by testimony about Paul's suffering, then an extract from an early Christian hymn.

Even though the text begins with an affirmation of Jesus' resurrection, Paul sees himself as continuing to participate in the sufferings of Jesus. He implies that in some way his own hardships play a part in enabling believers ('those who are chosen') to experience salvation and obtain eternal glory. A further implication is that all Christians must expect to share in the cross of Christ.

The hymn fragment presents the faithful with both promise and demand. On the positive side it affirms the irrevocable faithfulness of Christ. Those who die with him in baptism can be sure of life and glory. But this demands fidelity on our part. It is we, not Jesus, who can choose to compromise and cut ourselves off.

Readers need to be attentive to these three components. The short confession of faith with which the reading begins calls for strong delivery. The sentences that speak of Paul's sufferings invite a more reflective style of proclamation. The final section is a series of sayings that constitute another declaration of faith. Each of these should be proclaimed with conviction.

Gospel

Luke alone records the story of the ten lepers, though his earlier report of the healing of a leper (5:12-14) is found in the other synoptics. The location of this healing is vaguely described as "along the border between Samaria and Galilee". Whether Luke intended it or not, this suggests a striking contrast: from his place on the margins Jesus makes it possible for the marginalised lepers to find a place in the centre of the community's life.

At the start of his journey to Jerusalem (9:52), Jesus was made unwelcome in a Samaritan village. When his disciples wanted the villagers punished with fire from heaven, Jesus rebuked them. A little later he again challenges Galilean and Jewish prejudice with the parable of the good Samaritan (10:30-37). The story of the ten lepers reinforces this teaching of Jesus. This raises the question as to whether this parable is primarily aimed at exposing ingratitude or whether prejudice is the target. Either way, it presents Jesus attractively as one who responds to human plight with healing power.

Even though this story is found in no other gospel it is well embedded in our collective memory. Those who proclaim it will need to do so with freshness and vigour.