

An Attitude of Gratitude

From the Gospel: St. Luke xvii. 11.

11 And it came to pass , as he went to Jerusalem, that he passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. 12 And as he entered into a certain village, there met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off: 13 And they lifted up their voices, and said , Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. 14 And when he saw them, he said unto them, Go shew yourselves unto the priests. And it came to pass , that, as they went, they were cleansed . 15 And one of them, when he saw that he was healed , turned back , and with a loud voice glorified God, 16 And fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks : and he was a Samaritan. 17 And Jesus answering said , Were there not ten cleansed ? but where are the nine? 18 There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger. 19 And he said unto him, Arise , go thy way : thy faith hath made thee whole .

In last week's sermon, we noted the amazing behavior of a Samaritan, used as a powerful object lesson to convince Jesus' proud pharisaical audience what obedience to God's Law really entails. These Samaritans, despised as they were by God's covenanted people, the Jews, esteem themselves in several Gospel accounts as examples of true religion. We need only look to the story of the Samaritan woman, in John 4, and those of Samaritans in today's and last week's Gospels, to confirm this. Scripture puts them forth for consideration because they are such unlikely candidates, in the eyes of their Jewish contemporaries, for use as examples of religious service. Their very racial makeup, along with the history of their introduction to the land several centuries before, made them objects of contempt. After the forced deportation by the Assyrians in the 7th century B.C. of the Jews living in Samaria, people from at least five foreign nations were imported to replace them (see 2 Kings 17:24 ff.). They brought with them a variety of religious customs, creating a syncretistic mix by adding to them the worship of Jehovah. They continued living in the land, viewed as an offense by their Israelite counterparts. These are the dubious forbears of the Samaritans of the Gospels.

But it is often from the most unexpected of quarters that God raises up exemplars for the rest of us, resplendent in our religious observance, to behold. And such virtue is sometimes demonstrated with such innocence, such lack of self-consciousness, that its impact upon us is even more humbling. Last week's Samaritan didn't think twice about how to respond to the need of the hour. The Samaritan woman at the well immediately became an evangelist for Christ, following her conversion. And today's subject is twice cursed: both a Samaritan and a leper. But his response to his healing is something we must look at very closely. It is a response of *gratitude*.

Since he is specifically labelled *a Samaritan*, we may infer that the rest of the *lepers* were Jews. But the circumstance of their common illness had thrown them all together into one sorry, outcast camp:

And as [Jesus] entered into a certain village, there met him ten men that were lepers, which stood afar off: And they lifted up their voices, and said , Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.

The Mosaic Law commanded them to a life of miserable isolation:

And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean. (Lev. 13:45)

All ten men, however, were cleansed miraculously in an instant of their disease, an accomplishment which normally must have required long periods of uncertain waiting, with no guarantee of a cure. But...

... one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God, And fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan.

His spontaneous expression of gratitude provides us with much to think about, both in terms of our relationship to God, as in this instance, and our relationships with one another.

This act of thanksgiving is first an act of propriety. It is absolutely mandated under the circumstances. How could it be otherwise? These men had come seeking a certain end from the Lord, and they had received it. To not return thanks, at least in some measure, appears very selfish: "I've got what I wanted. Now off I go!" This is far too human a response to every propitious circumstance which life provides, whether the dawning of a new day, a kindness demonstrated by a spouse or a friend, recovery from illness, an unexpectedly favorable turn of events, and on the list goes. To this leper, deprived of everything: his dignity, his respect within the community, the company of family and friends, the hope of a future, this miracle of healing was the most wonderful thing that could ever have happened. He took exception to his cohorts, turned upon his heel, and *and with a loud voice glorified God, And fell down on his face at [Jesus'] feet, giving him thanks.*

Note secondly that gratitude requires outward expression. The Samaritan didn't say in his heart: "Of course I'm thankful! It goes without saying." And expressions of appreciation, whether to God or to man, are acts of generosity. Jesus had done the greater part. He had summoned the powers of heaven and earth together to do that which men could never do. All that was required of the recipients was the mere act of returning thanks. And so what prevents any of us, in our own circumstances, from doing so? Is it pride? Is it indolence? We can be certain that this poor man's worship warmed the heart of our Lord, just as the indifference of the others proved a disappointment to Him: *And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger.*

Thirdly, the Samaritan's actions afforded him personal interaction with his Healer, a further benefit of which the others were absolutely deprived: *And [Jesus] said unto him, Arise, go thy way: thy faith hath made thee whole.* The Samaritan is privileged to hear a word of personal commendation from Christ Himself that his friends will never hear. And it will surely remain with him until the end of his life.

All of the above bears very strongly upon our own lives. Let me use a simple illustration. In preparation for my training as a hospital chaplain that will begin soon, I have been assigned a

book that deals with death and dying. The author notes that very often the family members of those who are gravely ill or who have passed away find themselves awash with regrets: “If only I had done *this*. If only I had not done *that*.” All of us know these kind of thoughts very well. They are exceptionally difficult. But think of the Samaritan. He has received a gift as a consequence of his actions that is of equal or even greater worth than his healing. It is a clear conscience. He has expressed appropriate appreciation to One who certainly deserved it. His heart will never testify to him, “Why did you not speak up? Would it have been so difficult? Why didn’t you do that which had been in such easy reach of your abilities, and would have provided such a wonderful consequence?” This is at least one regret that he will not have to live with.

May I say that to the extent that we live out our lives in this manner, both to God and man, we will vastly reduce the list of regrets, and in their place provide ourselves with much peace and calmness of soul, even when we are faced with the inevitabilities of life to which we all are subject. Although the expression “have an attitude of gratitude” is really a bit of a platitude (!), it nevertheless describes a manner of thinking, a way of life, which yields the absolutely best results. Let no opportunity be lost! A word of appreciation to those around us, especially those closest to us. A breathed prayer to God for blessings both small and great. Even if we must manfully fight our own complacency in fulfilling these things, we do well. It may seem at first contrived and forced, but it is offered as a gift not to us but to another. And eventually that which has not been our habit will become a way of life.

In closing, we all have a debt to God which we must never cease to thank Him for relieving: the forgiveness of our sins, and our reconciliation to Him, as a well. Leprosy of the soul is far, far more dangerous than any skin disease could ever be, for it has eternal consequence. Every week we return to Christ to heal us of the consequence of “those things which we have left undone that we ought to have done, and those things we have done that we ought not to have done”, as says our General Confession (Book of Common Prayer, p. 6). We must plead with the Lord to keep us ever mindful of these things, lest we lose interest in Him, and in the end discover to our dismay that we have foolishly taken everything for granted, joining *the nine of the ten who were cleansed*, and simply...walking away, selfishly clutching that which was graciously and selflessly given.

How simple it is: a word to others; a word to God, as often as they are merited. Which is surely always, and often!

Help us, Lord.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.