

Celebrating Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019...

Sunday, 13 October 2019

28th Sunday in Ordinary time

Lk 17:11-19; 2 Kgs 5:14-17; 2 Tim 2:8-13

Mission as an Outflow of Gratitude

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It is said that 'god has two dwelling places, one in heaven and the other in grateful hearts.' Once a person experiences the Lord and his power, he both expresses it in his personal life and shares it with other people. The Lord also wishes it, "go home and tell your people how much the Lord has done for you," (Mk 5:9, Lk 8:39). In today's gospel Jesus specifically seems to be touching upon this theme, when he asked the one healed leper who returned to thank him for the healing, "where are the other nine? Did none of them feel coming back and thanking god?" Thus gratitude seems to be of great value in the Kingdom, because a grateful life, a grateful gesture, is an acknowledgement of God's (or any person's) kindness and generosity. Pope Francis says, "the Christian life is above all the grateful response to a generous Father." Card. Henry Newman, whose canonisation is taking place in Rome today, says, "thankfulness, I say, is eminently a Christian grace, and is enjoined on us in the New Testament."

We, however, live in a world where we easily forget what we owe to others but are keen on what others owe to us or what we need from them. The 10 lepers were keen on receiving what they wanted, namely, a healing of their infirmity, and thereby a return of their lives itself, since a leper was equal to a dead person in those days, though not physically. So they "shouted in a loud voice," for mercy from Jesus. But once they are healed, there is no complete silence, except from one, who came back "praising god in a loud voice." The other nine were too engrossed in that they had received what they wanted, and forgot everything else including the giver! "They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them," (Ps 78:11; 106:21).

As we are almost in the middle of the extra ordinary Missionary Month, let us pause three points for our reflection, in the light of today's liturgy. The first point is about the theme of today's readings itself. The question is, are today's reading focussing on thanking god for what we have received? It seems so from the first reading and the gospel. In the first reading (2 Kgs 5:14-17), Naaman the Syrian offers a great present to Elisha in gratitude of the healing he received, which of course the prophet declines. Jesus, similarly, seems to emphasise thankfulness to god, when he asks, "where are the nine others....?"

However, is it not ironical that the same Lord, who said, "when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'we are useless servants; we have only done what was our duty'," (Lk 17:10) demands an expression of gratitude? A closer look, however, shows that the real point of concern for Jesus is their rejection of the salvation offered by him. To the one who returned, Jesus said, "go your way, your faith has 'saved' you," which is the correct translation of the Greek word *sozo*. The healing had already taken place as they were on the way to the priests. However, the Samaritan who returned, receives more than a physical healing, he receives *salvation* offered by

Jesus. The contrast is between 'being healed' and 'being saved.' Jesus' query about the 'ungrateful' nine was an expression of his sadness at their missing the salvation he offers. Remember, all the 'signs' of Jesus was intended to bring the people to faith in him and thus achieve life (John 20:31).

Both physical healing and salvation are gifts of the Lord, but salvation requires a constant, continued relation with Jesus, which we see in the man who returned to Jesus. Naaman does the same thing. Since his present was rejected by the prophet, he accepts the God of Israel as the only true god and asks for "two mules' load of earth" from Israel, so the he can take it to Syria, and worship the true God on Israel's soil itself. A great expression of his commitment and connection to the God who healed him! If the favours we receive do not lead us to a constant relation with Jesus, once the favours are forgotten or when another problem comes up, we forget him again, as it happens in the life of many Christians, since the focus is only on the physical healing, what is external, and not on a personal relation with Jesus. All the ten were healed of their stigma, and were brought to life, in all its aspects. But for the nine, it did not take them further than the material/physical realm. So, do I expect the healing power of Jesus or the saving power of Jesus? The answer will be reflected in my life style, in our relation with Jesus.

Secondly, a proper relation to god can only spring from a grateful heart. Pope Francis says, "gratitude is a characteristic trait of the heart visited by the Holy Spirit; to obey God we must first remember his benefits." Paul who considered himself the least of the apostles, was a man of gratitude, who exhorts all his churches to be always thankful ("in everything," 1 Thes 5:18, "for all things," Eph 5:20) and he considered not thanking god the first step to apostasy (Rom 1:21). The Psalms present thanksgiving as the greatest sacrifice, "offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving," (50:14, 23, 107:22 etc.). This is what one finds in the charismatic way of life, where thanking and praising god is considered of prime importance. Therefore, in order to advance in spiritual life, we must develop a grateful heart, both towards people and towards god, and god will 'dwell in our hearts.'

Thirdly, the readings clearly show the real source of our missionary activity. In his message for the extra ordinary missionary month, Pope Francis beautifully defines mission in these terms: "our filial relationship with God is not something simply private, but always in relation to the Church. Through our communion with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we... are born to new life. This divine life is ...a treasure to be given, communicated and proclaimed: that is the meaning of mission." The great mission command is to reach out and share what "we have heard, we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands." Because, an encounter with and experience of Jesus cannot but be shared. A couple who were seen distributing sweets in front of a hospital, for having a baby after 13 years of marriage, was sharing their blessing. The healed leper, who was praising god "loudly" in the presence of all, was sharing his blessing. The Samaritan woman who went and told the people to "come and see the man who told me all what I did" was sharing her experience of Christ. This is the real spirit of missionary activity and evangelisation.

Interestingly, the nine, who did not return to thank Jesus were Jews, who were expected to know the value and importance of thanking god. But they, like their fathers, whose love for God was like the "morning dew" showed the same 'stiff-

neckedness,' and ingratitude, as their eyes were on the 'onions and meat pots of Egypt' and not on the God who bought them out of slavery with his 'mighty arms,' and they forgot to acknowledge the graces received. Yes, even today, very often it is the 'Samaritans,' the least expected ones among us, who share their faith much more than the most privileged and expected ones! If we really value the gift of faith we have received, we will let it shine like a 'lamp on the hill' and not 'under a bushel,' that 'seeing out good works people may praise the heavenly father.' May the Lord of all goodness fill us with a grateful heart, that we become true missionaries through the free and joyful sharing of what we have freely received.

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