

Proper 23

2 Kings 5:14-17
Timothy 2:8-13
Luke 17:11-19

Sermon by Rod Prince

My Dad, who would have been 90 today, had many memorable phrases, one of which is apt for today's Gospel reading. It is, 'Gratitude is the shortest lived human emotion'. Indeed it is.

The Samaritans were a nation with a bad reputation. We can think of some nations that have that today, Iran perhaps or North Korea and until comparatively recently, Germany. It is a human trait to stereotype others. It makes dealing with life much easier. He is from Romania therefore he must be a criminal. She is from Thailand, living in the UK – hmm, well she is no better than she should be – an odd phrase when you consider it none of us are better than we should be, usually worse.

My all-time musical comedian hero, Tom Lehrer wrote a song that includes 'All the Protestants hate the Catholics and the Catholics hate the Protestants, the Muslims, hate the Hindus and everybody hates the Jews!'. Well back in First Century Palestine, the Jews hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans hated the Jews and everyone hated the Romans – so to quote from the book of Ecclesiastes 'There is nothing new under the sun'. We all make sweeping judgements that damage both ourselves and those we tar with our brush of contempt.

The gospel writers go to great lengths to show that Jesus was not just the Saviour of the Jewish people. He is the saviour of all, including the most despised nations on earth. Neither is He the saviour of only the Good and the just. He comes to 'save', I prefer to use the words 'Make Whole' the bad and the outcast. Today's Gospel is one of a number of parables that stress that Jesus comes for ALL. We think of the parable of the Shrewd Manager, recently, the parable of The Good Samaritan. Jesus deliberately selects these 'baddies' to be 'Goodies' to challenge our prejudices. He jolts us out of our comfortable ruts that we live in and forces us to examine our motives and our actions.

Being English does not make us nice people, just as being Iranian makes anyone horrible. Being born in a Christian land and having been baptised without our consent does not mean we are 'Saved'. It does not give us any rights with God. We have none by our own virtue only by His grace.

We cannot hope to win our way into the heavenly kingdom by keeping our noses clean, by believing that 'Upstairs' there is a heavenly ledger which, providing we manage to keep the credits just ahead of the debits, means we can squeak in. Sounds silly doesn't it until you realise that over many centuries the Jewish people honed that belief into a bizarre set of rules for living. It meant they were more focussed on their own lives than on other people and God. Christians too spent centuries believing that they could buy their way out of trouble and into heaven, until Martin Luther and others pointed out that only faith saves. Works may demonstrate the living presence of faith in our lives but it is faith that heals.

This smugness led to Jews and Christians through the ages deciding that the best way to deal with those who most need help is to physically exclude them from the life of the community. People with mental and physical diseases were cast out from human society. This ability of humans to justify the unjustifiable is truly remarkable; it demeans humanity.

So in the parable today we come across 1 poor soul who was the wrong nationality and who bore a socially unacceptable disease. He was despised and rejected. Recognise that phrase? It is from Isaiah Chapter 53 describing the suffering servant one of the passages where Isaiah foretells Jesus. Jesus sees in the faces and the lives of the ten lepers his own situation. He too will share their fate. He will be despised, rejected and cast out by those he comes to make whole. When Jesus makes the ten lepers whole He demonstrates that he has come to make the Jewish people whole. And of these, only one, the Samaritan outcast returns to thank Jesus.

Why the 9 do not return we shall never know. But I wonder whether the Jewish lepers who were healed felt it was their right. No gratitude was needed because they deserved to be healed. They were the chosen ones of God, of course they should be healed. The Samaritan, however, was under no such illusion. He had been granted the gift of healing, freely offered. There was no payment that could be made,. All he could do in the face of such generosity was to come before Jesus in person and give Him thanks.

That is faith. That is what Jesus meant when He said to the leper 'Your faith has saved you'. The leper's gratitude is the outward expression of his faith, his recognition that Jesus is the source of his healing.

Gratitude is the shortest lived human emotion because we dislike being and accepting that we are in the debt of others; to be restricted in our lives by attachments that bind us. Faith is the acknowledgement that we are not in control. We are attached to God; that we are the recipients of His grace and He is the source of our healing. Faith is the recognition that our whole lives are His gift. He is our all. There is nothing we can give Him in return that could in any way ever re-pay or recompense Him. Like the leper all we can do is to turn, make our way back to Him, bring ourselves before Him and say 'Thank you – you make me whole'.