

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

(1Kings 5:14-17 / Luke 17:11-19)

13.10.2019

*Distance*

In the Bible, leprosy, uncleanness and divine punishment are intertwined realities. Because of this leprosy is dealt with in a radical way: by means of religious and social excommunication. Lepers cannot come close to anybody and are in a state of impurity which prevents them from being in relationship with God.

While the Samaritan leper who came back to Jesus was restored to physical health, Jews still considered him as a heretical and schismatic believer with whom they did not want to have contact.

In the way St Luke reports the event, there is an element which is striking. At first the ten lepers speak to Jesus “standing some way off”, at a distance. But when the healed Samaritan comes back, he throws “himself at the feet of Jesus”.

The movement from “some way off” to “the feet of Jesus” reminds us of St Paul’s words in the letter to the Ephesians. To these Christians from a pagan background, he writes: “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:13).

Maybe herein lies the greatest lesson of the Gospel story heard today. Jesus heals us from our fear of God which makes us hold him at bay. The good news of the Incarnation is that, in Jesus Christ, God “indeed is not far from each one of us” (Act 17:27). While our first reaction, like that of St Peter is to say: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Lk 5:8), we have to let go of our fears and to allow the Lord to come close to us, and make his home within us.

We really should not keep God at a distance, should we?

Sometimes we prefer God not to be too involved in our lives. Sometimes we want to keep him as we would a silent idol stuck in a niche unable to interfere with our lifestyle and decisions.

Unfortunately there are many ways for us to create a long distance relationship with God. We can go to religious Services and yet not really listen to God. We can read the Bible or receive the Sacraments and yet prevent them from bearing fruit in our lives, hindering them from converting us to the Gospel.

In the story we have just heard, not only does Jesus invite us to reflect on what kind of relationship we have with God, he also challenges us to consider what kind of God we want to worship.

Is the God we worship a God who belongs to just one people, one race, and one Christian denomination? Is our God so small that his fatherhood can only concern a tiny portion of humanity, in which case he cannot be the Father of all (cf. Ep 4:6)?

The Samaritan leper, the Syrophenician woman and her possessed daughter (cf. Mt 7:24-27), the centurion and his sick servant (cf. Lk 7:1-10) bear witness to the fact that God is able to accomplish miracles in the lives of men and women who are considered to be enemies, heretics and impure. God is not restricted by the walls we erect between us, his grace is not given in accordance with our narrow, judgemental, selective and fearful criteria but in accordance with his generosity which knows no bounds.

Are we like the prophet Jonah who could not bear the idea that God might want to extend his kindness to people who were not members of his own religion, and especially if

those people were living in great sin like the people of Nineveh? Or are we able to marvel and give thanks for what Luther calls “God’s goodness to all the world”? (in *A Journey...*, Murray, p. 55)

God does not consider first our race, culture, sexual orientation, wealth, achievements or political affiliation but our hearts. Let us remember the words of the Lord to Samuel: “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature (...); for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1Sam 16:7). The healed Samaritan leper had a grateful heart and this was enough for God.

There is one last element which is worth noticing in St Luke’s account of the event. We are told that the Samaritan man fell the face on the ground. This posture reveals a huge amount of gratitude, respect and awe. However the important point is that Jesus invites him to “stand up”. Here the Greek word is the same word that is used for the resurrection.

The old walls of excommunication have been broken down, the stone which kept this man in a tomb has been rolled away. He is risen!

Here we see a beautiful display of mutual respect. The Samaritan man honoured Jesus by falling on the ground, and Jesus honours the man by allowing him to stand up as a human being created in the image and likeness of God. Jesus does not expect us to lie prostrate on the ground, in a servile manner. He does not take any pleasure in us being less than we are. He is honoured and glorified when humanity is respected and honoured.

Here is another challenge for us. Do we help one another to stand up? When one of us falls, when somebody is humiliated and prostrated to the ground, do we invite him or her to rise up and to move on?

It is important for us to be clear: Jesus makes no preconditions for the healing of the ten lepers, and no preconditions for the Samaritan man to stand up and go on his way. Similarly, we should be careful not to encourage only those with whom we agree, only those whom we judge worthy of our help.

All men and women are entitled to hear from us an echo of Jesus’ words: “Stand up and go on your way”. All are entitled to receive the help they need in order to reconnect with their self-confidence and to regain a clearer sense of their purpose in life. Like St Paul we have to strive to “become all things to all people” (1Cor 9:22).

Pope Francis reminds us that “as Christians, we cannot be indifferent (...) to the bleak isolation, contempt and discrimination experienced by those who do not belong to ‘our’ group. We cannot remain insensitive. We must not fail to weep. We must not fail to respond” (*Hom.* 29.09.2019).