**TWENTY EIGHTH SUNDAY YEAR C**

**9th October 2022**

**Reading 1: 2 Kings 5:14-17**

It is worth reading the whole of Chapter 5 because a most important feature in the story about Naaman the Syrian occurs prior to our extract. Naaman expected a spectacular cure and was annoyed when Elisha told him to go and wash in the Jordan—that puny little ditch, when there were far more imposing rivers back home! Despite deep misgivings, Naaman was persuaded, by his own servants, to try it.

This is an example of the way God works in the world. He chooses to work through the ordinary and unexpected and indeed through outsiders. Evidence for this principle may be found in every aspect of Christianity from the Magi at the Nativity to the expansion of the Church. This frequently means that the unimportant minority is the means of grace and is illustrated by to-day’s story.

In antiquity, leprosy was regarded as the worst of diseases, and its cure an impossibility. Thus, the story became a parable of the human plight, from which they would only be delivered by the Messiah, that is, by a miracle at the end of time.

Another aspect of this story, which is taken up by the New Testament in Jesus' sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30), is the fact that Naaman was a Syrian and therefore excluded from the community of Israel. Thus, his healing foreshadows the universality of Jesus’ reign. Rejected by Israel, membership would be opened up to the Gentiles:

This theme of universality is also picked up in today’s gospel, in which the nine Jewish lepers did not return to give thanks, but only the tenth, and he was a Samaritan.

The healing of Naaman the leper by Elisha the prophet (2 Kings 5:1-18) is a close parallel to the gospel story. A cure of leprosy is wrought on both occasions and an impressive example given of unreserved gratitude. It is a pity that the lectionary reading is a mere snippet because the Naaman story is delightfully told. Naaman hears of 'the prophet who is in Samaria' from an Israelite slave-girl carried off in a raid (5:1-5). (Throughout the New Testament and indeed, up to Constantine and Augustine, there is a constant succession of stories of Christian women having influence over their menfolk from behind the scenes)

There is also the consternation of the King of Israel who receives a letter from the Syrian king: 'I have sent to you my servant Naaman that you may cure him of his leprosy.' 'Am I God'?' he exclaims, and fears a trap; the Syrians, he thinks, are trying to engineer a confrontation (vv. 6-7). Naaman, bidden by a messenger from the prophet to bathe seven times in the Jordan, is highly indignant - he had expected to meet the man himself and be honourably received. He was persuaded by his retinue to do as the prophet had asked (vv. 9-14). And then came the cure which leads Naaman to acknowledge Yahweh as the supreme and only God. He had encountered Yahweh in Yahweh's own land; he takes the precaution of returning home with two mule-loads of Israel's soil with him so that, in Damascus, he may erect an altar for the worship of Yahweh.

**Responsorial Psalm: 98:1-4**

Generally, the psalms come from the Jerusalem Temple worship and scholars say that today’s comes from the enthronement of a King at a new year celebration.

Its significance for us is the refrain which claims that the "nations" see God's saving power. This idea and vocabulary, it certainly shares with Second Isaiah, (Chapters 40-55) as the words "saving power," "victory," and "vindication" show. So if the authors were contemporary, it may have originally celebrated Israel's return from exile in Babylon. The nations are passive witnesses rather than active players in the divine salvation. As spectators, they watch Israel return from exile and see in it an act of Yahweh's self-vindication.

**Reading II: 2 Timothy 2:8-13**

The mention of chains and hardship sounds convincingly real. The author is finding imprisonment hard to bear in old age and comforts himself by recalling why he is there. Paul suffered several spells in prison and we are unsure as to which one this was. The house arrest in Rome mentioned in Acts 28;30-31 sounds too lenient, but it is believed that he was released from that, because of time-expired, only to be rearrested for a sentence which would turn out to be his last.

If the Pastorals (Timothy and Titus) were written during either of these imprisonments this passage fittingly reflects his situation just before his martyrdom. There is a poignant contrast between the Apostle's own condition—wearing fetters like a criminal—and his confident assertion that the word of God is not bound.

The final part of the reading consists of an early Christian hymn, with a striking twist in the last two lines: *even if we are faithless, God still remains faithful*.

**Gospel: Luke 17:11-19**

Leprosy was a term which in the Bible covers a variety of diseases which could not be distinguished. (Leviticus 13) (In medical matters, it is helpful to remember that the author was a medical doctor and uses technical words with precision) The Law was helpless in regard to leprosy and could only defend the community against the leper. In this case, they remained at a distance as the Law demanded (vv. 12-14; see Leviticus 13:45). The disease united those who would otherwise be natural enemies against society. They have heard of Jesus’ reputation but do not even ask for a cure, but just understanding of their condition. Jesus' command (v. 14) implied the granting of more than their request – there is no requirement of repentance and the healing is gratuitous and attributed solely to faith.

This story speaks volumes. It certainly originated with an actual historical occasion, but was misinterpreted by the second Christian generation in their teaching programmes. The key point that Luke makes is that all had shown faith in the word of Jesus but only one, a Samaritan, returned to thank him (vv. 15-16). By implication the others were Jews; mutual hatred (see 9:53) had been forgotten in their common misery. The nine sons of Abraham had apparently accepted the miracle as a matter of course; but Jesus praises the gratitude of the 'foreigner' (one of the mixed Samaritan race). Again (see 7:9; 10:30-37) a 'stranger' puts Jews to shame and already the contrasting attitudes of Jew and Gentile to Jesus and his gospel are foreshadowed.

The perceived misunderstanding occurs because Luke and his readers failed to appreciate the fact that the Jews were obliged by their Law to register their cure with the Temple authorities and isolate for eight days in quarantine. (Leviticus 14;10) During the liturgical programme many expressions of gratitude would be made. The story does not tell us how far the party had gone before the cure, but if it was a matter of minutes it would have been unnatural if not humanly impossible not to turn to see the man who could perform such healing. If however, it was a matter of hours they would have been a considerable distance on the way to Jerusalem.

The Samaritan was the one case where this did not apply. He was not subject to the Torah and could simply go straight home. But he didn’t. The fact is that he was sufficiently civilised to return to thank Jesus in his informal way, while the Jews complied with the Torah and thanked God in their prescribed way.

Thus, the lesson should be taken not as anti-Semitic, but simply showing that God’s grace is universal, though in practice the Gentile Church took it as a promoting Gentile liberty over Jewish Law. It is striking that though all ten lepers were equally healed the Gentile got no more than the Jews except the assurance from the Lord, ‘Your faith has made you well."