



ST. STEPHEN'S
 ANGLICAN CHURCH
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The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 23rd, 2019

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
 and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The underlying theme of today's Propers – the collect appointed and today's bible readings – can broadly be described as God's thoughts on prayer.

The message is he wants us to pray to him not because he is our creator and redeemer, but because it is good for us. It is not within our power to do him any good, but the fact of the matter is the closer we can bring ourselves to him, the better it is for us.

So how do we go about the business of getting in closer contact with him? Today's collect says it all. The first thing we need to bring to our prayers is faith, hope and charity, St. Paul's big three. If we lack faith that God will hear our prayers, and the hope that he will respond to us, and the good will – charity – that inspires sincerity there is absolutely no point in getting down on our knees.

Having covered theory in the collect, today's Gospel provides us with a practical case study on prayer. The case involves 10 lepers who Jesus cured by a miracle of healing – a miracle indistinguishable from countless others.

And it began with a shopping list prayer: "O Lord, get me out of this one." The lepers actually shouted: "Jesus, master, have mercy upon us." But it means the same thing.

"Go and shew yourselves to the priests," Jesus replied. It was such a rare thing for lepers to be cured that the law required that such claims be certified by the Jewish equivalent of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In any event, the lepers took off in a hurry and along the way they discovered they had been cured. The thing that Luke finds remarkable is that only one of them returned to say thanks. And ironically, that one thankful person was the only non-Jew among them: a hated Samaritan.

But as far as our case history of prayer is concerned the folks we should consider are the nine lepers who didn't come back. But before we do, we need to understand something about the nature of the disease.

It is no easy matter in this age in which sulfur drugs, antibiotics and open-heart surgery are common place to grasp the depths of the lepers' ingratitude. It's difficult for people today to conceive of the feelings of horror leprosy used to inspire.

Probably the fear engendered by Ebola or AIDS before the discovery of Protease Inhibitors probably comes closest. Like AIDS, leprosy was a slow, certain killer. As was often the case with AIDS, leprosy left its victims wasted and horribly disfigured. This is why contracting leprosy was regarded as the most appalling fate that could befall a human being.

Leprosy was believed to be extremely contagious, and for three and a half millennia conventional public health practice decreed that the people who contracted the disease should be banned from human society. In the Middle Ages, public health laws required them to ring bells and shout "unclean" when approaching other people. Friends shunned leprous friends; wives

shunned husbands; parents shunned children. The sick were left to make shift as best they could for the dying.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Jewish Law had much to say about leprosy and lepers. In fact, the Book of Leviticus devotes two whole chapters (13 & 14) to the diagnosis of leprosy and to the manner in which sufferers were to be treated. Lepers were permanently banned from society. The only way they could return was to present themselves to the priests at the Temple to be declared clean.

No exceptions were made, even monarchs like Judah's great king Uzziah were forbidden to associate with the healthy. King Uzziah was confined in a specially built palace, but most lepers were condemned to live in the wilderness or amid city garbage dumps, picking a living from the trash the more fortunate folks threw away.

When a visit to the municipal trash dump entailed the risk of encountering numbers of terribly disfigured lepers, small wonder that Jews, when they envisioned hell, pictured it as the Vale of Gahanna, the vast garbage dump outside the walls of Jerusalem.

This, then, was the horrible fate from which Jesus rescued the 10 lepers – a living death and a living hell. From this perspective, it's almost impossible to understand why nine of them failed to return, not simply to thank him, but to consecrate their lives to his service.

It wasn't that they didn't believe that he was the Messiah. Plainly they did. Their plea for help demonstrates their faith: "Master have mercy on us." Clearly, they didn't doubt his ability to heal them. Their only uncertainty was his willingness to do so. Why, then, did they not give thanks?

If you had asked them why they hadn't given thanks, they would probably have been outraged. They would have told you that they rejoiced and gave thanks to God all the way to Jerusalem and then rejoiced and gave thanks to God all the way back to their homes. But this would have missed the point. There is a world of difference between There is, however, a vast difference between shouting a perfunctory "hallelujah" and meeting God face to face to give him thanks.

Their failure to return thank Jesus indicates that their gratitude was only skin-deep. Although they might have felt thankful towards God, they didn't act upon it; they didn't let their of thankfulness transform their lives. Thanks are only genuine when we act upon it. And their thanks, like ours so often is, was pure lip service.

It would be wrong, however, to interpret this incident as foreshadowing a failure on the part of the Jewish people to act on Christ's Gospel. Indeed, many of them did, indeed, accept the Gospel. Nor should the grateful Samaritan be seen as typical of the average Christian. We, average Christians, are much more like the ones who didn't bother to come back. Like them, we tend to take the gifts God gives us for granted.

But if that thought is frightening, Jesus' reaction to the lepers' ingratitude should be tremendously comforting to all of us. The remarkable thing about the incident is not that nine lepers didn't return to give thanks. The truly remarkable thing is Jesus' reaction to their failure.

To be sure, he is not very pleased with them, but he doesn't punish them for their ingratitude – far from it. Instead, of castigating them, he rejoices in the one who came back to give thanks and then gets on with teaching, knowing, of course, that, sooner rather than later, the ingrates will be begging him to answer their prayers again.

And, sad to say, most of us do what the nine lepers did – give God a shopping list of prayers, and perfunctory thanks when he answers them. God wants our thanks because it helps build up the close relationship with him that makes faith, hope and charity grow in our hearts.

In giving him genuine, heartfelt thanks, we learn to give him the genuine, heartfelt praise that leads to the deepest sort of prayer – the prayer that “lifts us to his presence where we may be still and know that he is God.” And that, after

all, is what prayer is really all about. *AMEN.*