

Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
October 13, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 17:11-19

Our Old Testament lesson is evidence enough that miracles performed by holy men were part of the Jewish experience. At the order of Elisha the prophet, Naaman the Syrian military commander washed in the Jordon and was healed of his leprosy. But there are so many more. From the parting of the Red Sea during the Exodus from Egypt to one day's lamp oil lasting eight during the Maccabean revolt for independence, the Jews were accustomed to God's direct intervention in human affairs. Supernatural healing, supernatural events were not uncommon.

Therefore, when word spread about Jesus' power to heal disease, it should come as no surprise to us that these lepers from today's Gospel sought out our Lord. What is surprising is that after their miraculous healing only one of the men came back to Jesus to say thank you. If we reflect just a little bit on this phenomenon, however, we see that only one of the men could not have taken his healing for granted. Whereas the Jews were accustomed to the miraculous in their midst, Samaritans were not. The Samaritan is not only grateful, he is shocked, amazed that what happened to him was even possible.

Herein we see the gratitude of the foreigner, the word Jesus used to describe the man who thanked our Lord for His kindness. This dynamic is present even today, especially here in our own native land. Like Jesus in His own day, we live in the midst of many foreigners, immigrants to the United States, who highlight for us the things we take for granted, in the same way the Samaritan's gratitude illustrated the degree to which the Jews took miracles in stride. Therefore, I'm going to talk this morning about a few things we in America take for granted. We should be falling on our faces with the Samaritan out of our profound gratitude, but it is often only the foreigners who do so.

The first thing most Americans take for granted is our nation's incredible wealth. The partial government shutdown has highlighted this reality, as we read story after story about how terrible it is our park rangers aren't working and we can't apply for passports. In what other nation would these be urgent concerns about which the press would feel compelled to write countless stories? I recently saw a movie in which Dinesh D'Souza recounted a conversation with a classmate at Dartmouth. The classmate told Dinesh that he was enthralled with India, attracted to its mystique. Having come from India, where he grew up, Dinesh asked the man, "What is more attractive to you, the grinding poverty or the caste system?"

This leads me to a second thing Americans take for granted. For all of our wealth, class is not an inhibition to social advancement. All across the world a person's background too often determines where he'll go to school, if he can go to school at all. It affects his prospects for employment, for marriage, and for the patronage jobs dispersed by the government. Years ago I asked my father-in-law why he immigrated to the United States in the middle of the Vietnam War. He told me quite frankly, "In Colombia, I didn't have the right last name." He knew that in America opportunity would not be closed to him because he was a Berrio.

Though Kristina and I have been married more than seventeen years, I've never been to Colombia. When we had the money to go, her own family told us not to, because it was too dangerous due to the security situation. For all of America's violence, we don't really worry that we'll get blown up or shot as we leave Mass today. In many parts of the world that is a serious concern. And though I could go to Colombia today, I could not yet go about openly as a Catholic priest from the States; the narco-terrorists still kidnap priests to extort money from what they perceive is the wealthy American church.

I couldn't wear my clericals in Turkey either. There, it's against the law for priests to wear their cassocks outside the actual church. Proselytizing is forbidden, and in nations like Pakistan sharing one's faith may provoke the enforcement of their extensive blasphemy laws, often used to separate Christians from their property and families by someone lodging false accusations. I've talked a lot about our own government's infringement upon our religious liberty in America, but we are nevertheless free to speak openly about our faith to our neighbors; and they are free to convert, and no one in our government would think to issue an arrest warrant.

Our traditions of liberty and equality aren't all we take for granted, nor is our wealth or our security. If we consider only life's necessities, like healthcare, for example, we have it made here, too. One of our parishioners is a native of Benin. Do you know what the leading cause of death is for women in Benin? Childbirth. My brother and sister-in-law aren't here today because Jane has gone to the hospital to give birth. Many of your hearts just leapt for joy, and mine did, too, when I found out. But nobody just thought, "Boy, I hope she doesn't die." Our experience in America has taught us to expect that all will be well.

My purpose today is to consider the gratitude of the foreigner and how he accepts gifts from God with all the awe and wonder they deserve. We could easily concentrate upon our nation's flaws and where improvements need to be made, what we don't yet have, and what has been lost. We would do better, though, to concentrate on being grateful for the gifts we already possess. These gifts, after all, are the very means by which we will be able to right the wrongs that afflict our country and our countrymen. It is our gratitude for our freedom of religion that will remind us that legalized abortion will end as soon as we convert our neighbors. It is our gratitude for our wealth that will teach us how very much we have to give for the work of the Church. It is our gratitude for our security and our health that will lead us to concentrate our purposes beyond our basic necessities, that will remind us that we are free to work for justice and peace.

So even as we welcome the foreigner to our shores and encourage him to take advantage of the opportunities his homeland did not afford him, we can also look to him as an example. We can see in him the gratitude we ourselves should have, taking for granted none of the blessings God has bestowed upon our country; and then we can use these blessings to change our nation for the better.