

# 28<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## St. Luke 17:11-19

Leprosy or as it is called today, Hansen's Disease, is a disease caused by a bacteria that forms on the nerves. It causes damage to the skin, nerves, limbs and eyes. Effectively, parts of the body rot away whilst the person remains alive. In 2021 the World Health Organisation estimated that between two and three million people were affected by the disease. Today there is a cure available and over the past twenty years it is estimated that over fifteen million people have been cured. However, leper colonies still exist around the world. These colonies are segregated communities of men, women and children suffering leprosy and who have been relegated to these outposts as a way to keep safe the rest of the population. In India alone there are over one thousand leper colonies, even though a cure is readily available.

This same stigma existed in first century Palestine. Lepers, in Our Lord's time, were forced to live outside the cities and villages, many living in rubbish dumps and trying to survive off the refuse along with wild dogs. If they approached a city or village or come across the path of anyone else they were to ring a bell which hung around their neck and shout "unclean, unclean!" This is why the Gospel says that Our Lord spoke to the ten lepers "from a distance." Lepers were isolated by law from their families, from their friends, from any form of support that could ease the pain of their isolation. On top of all of this they also had to bear with the stench of their own rotting flesh as they slowly and agonisingly died.

As leprosy causes the body to rot, forcing them to live in isolation, alienating sufferers from others, so does sin causes the soul to rot, leaving man in isolation from God, from others, and from himself. When the Lord cured the ten lepers He did not simply cure them of a physical disease, He restored to

them their life and all that it means. These ten lepers would no longer need to live in the garbage of the city, or to hang a bell around their neck and shout that they are “unclean,” nor live away from families and their friends. The end of the disease meant the beginning of their life with others. So why did only one of the ten lepers return to thank Christ? And why was it that the one who returned to Christ was not a Jew but a Samaritan; effectively the enemy of the Jews?

It is a matter of gratitude. The word gratitude comes from the latin word for “thanks” and is the same root as the word “grace.” That is, “thanks” and “grace” are bound to one another. So why did only one of the ten lepers return? Maybe it was because the nine that did not return were Jews and so were presumptuous of God’s power in their lives—an audacity that expected God should heal them. Maybe the nine did not return because they did not appreciate or understand the magnitude of what had happened. If I do not believe that I have sinned and that I am a sinner then why would I show gratitude to God for forgiving me? Even If I do admit of sin but I do not admit of the gravity of my sin then I will treat forgiveness just as lightly. It is only if I acknowledge that I have sinned against God and man and that I have contributed to the death of my soul and the soul of others would I appreciate the forgiveness of God that bears that death upon Himself and gives to me in return His very own life.

The Sacrament of Penance is gravely undervalued and it will be undervalued if I do not believe in sin and I presume upon God’s mercy. In the sacrament God’s mercy is made known to me as I hand to Him my sins and He bears them in Himself on the Cross so that my sins cause not my own death but His death. But the forgiveness granted in the sacrament is not automatic. I must be receptive of that grace. In other words, God offers me the possibility of a return to a state of grace but I must be thankful for that grace. That is, “grace” and “thanks” are bound to one another.

The one leper of the ten that returned understood the death he had lived because of leprosy and the life that he had been given by Christ. The grace that he had received he returned with gratitude. That is why the Lord can say to him, "Your faith has saved you." His salvation was not simply a matter of his physical healing but of his spiritual healing, and so the healing of his humanity.

Unless I know the potency of sin I will not know the vigour of life. Unless I know gratitude I will not know grace.