

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. [Amen].

Today's Gospel lesson gives us a glimpse of a somewhat unique incident in the life of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It is also a story which calls to mind several other times in the Gospels in which Our Lord Jesus healed people who were calling out to Him, approaching Him, seeking deliverance from their sickness and brokenness and pain through His limitless mercy.

The scene opens with Jesus travelling from outside of the central "homeland" of the Jewish people, on the fringes or borderland, on His way to the Holy City, Jerusalem. The verse preceding where our selection begins tells us, "*now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee.*" Jesus is travelling in territory close and familiar to the area in which He grew up, but distant from Jerusalem and its Temple. This area was near to that last remnant of the old Northern Kingdom of Israel, which had separated from the Kingdom of Judah centuries before. The acceptance of pagan practices led the "Southern" Jewish people of Jerusalem and Judah to consider these people, later known as Samaritans, as different, impure, "mixed," and as false claimants to be a part of the heritage of God's people.

It is in this very area, though, that ten people who might be the least likely to come to Jesus dared to come forth, to seek Him out, to look for Him. Leprosy, or any of the skin diseases which might disfigure a person, was thought to make a person ritually unclean, for both Jews and Samaritans, and the discomfort, disfigurement, and alienation which accompanied these types of diseases left those who were overcome by them in a double suffering - that of the affliction, itself, and that of the cutting off from the comfort, company, and care of other human beings.

Today's Gospel tells us that the lepers, though, "met" Jesus at the gates of the village which Jesus was entering, although they are noted to have stood "afar off." What a boldness of

hope these ten had, overcoming the social rejection which was encoded in the religious Law, and enforced by the harshness of the disease and its effects on the human body, willing to show themselves, hoping, perhaps, to just fall under the loving gaze of this Healer from Galilee, whom they had (no doubt) heard of as a powerful worker of miracles and healings. All ten cried out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!”

Now, that phrase should sound very familiar to us for a couple of reasons. First of all, what deep and treasured prayer of the Orthodox Tradition does this call to our minds...? [**A: *The Jesus Prayer: “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”***]. Secondly, there are three other places in the Gospels where people approach Jesus and cry out with a similar cry. One case is the two blind men, sitting by the side of the road, whom Saint Matthew wrote kept crying out, “***Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou son of David.***” Another is the woman of Canaan, whose daughter was afflicted by an evil spirit, who called to Jesus, “***Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou son of David,***” and pleaded, “***Help me.***” A third is another blind man, Bartimaeus, who also called out, “***Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me.***” Notice how, when the ten leprous men approached, their call, or cry, or prayer, is very similar, but with one important difference: Saint Luke writes in his gospel that these men called out, “Jesus, ***Master***, have mercy on us!”. The other stories emphasize that those approaching, needing healing, recognized Jesus in His royal lineage, in His role as Messiah and national hero for the People of Israel - and, also, affirm His place as a real, living, human being. The lepers, though, are praying and crying to their MASTER - Lord - [ἐπιστάτης, ***e-pē-stā'-tās - an overseer, or ‘boss,’ sharing a root with the Greek word for ‘bishop’***]. We see in them a recognition that Jesus is something even more than that. The nine who were *not* the Samaritan were, the story suggests, faithful Jewish men - but they, and the

“outsider” Samaritan - all are acknowledging Jesus as the One with power over their life, their bodies, their disease, and their very existence.

With that in mind, one of the parts of the story which is most striking - and, also, most confusing - seems to jump out at us, in sharp relief. Jesus does **not** heal the ten men from their leprosy and *then* send them, as the Law prescribes, to present themselves to the priests to have their healing verified, and to give a suitable sacrifice in thanksgiving.

- *What does He do?*

Instead of acting in the “usual order of things”, Jesus, rather, sends the men on their way to present themselves for the required screening and offering, ***without first healing them!*** What faith - or, at least, ***great*** hope, a hope against all hope, a hope contrary to reason, all of them must have had! Often, I think, we hear this story, and think of the nine not returning, and think (maybe with no small trace of judgmentalism, or, maybe, even self-justification), “Those bad nine! I would have been more thankful, like that good Samaritan boy!”

But - what a great leap of faith to set out to give thanks for what ***you have not yet seen***, when what we ***may not be able to see*** is about to happen, or, perhaps, has ***already begun to happen***, on our behalf, invisibly, in God’s infinite love and mercy and in His own sense of “timing”. This story seems to be, in part, very much about what faith is - and the trust shown by all ten reveals something about the first step of faith - absolute, yielding, surrendering to Christ, being willing to follow His commandments, even when no visible result or “reward” is present.

Now, the second part of the story, of course, reveals that there is more to this dynamic of faith than just that first step. Our life in Christ is meant to be a lived-out existence in a state of thankfulness. That is what “Eucharist,” which we gather to celebrate at the altar, means. In

writing about the healing of the lepers, one of the saints whom we commemorate today - Saint Athanasius of Alexandria - wrote,

“You recall that He loved the one who was thankful, but he was angry with the ungrateful ones, because they did not acknowledge their Deliverer. They thought more highly of their cure from leprosy than of him who had healed them.... [he continues, about the Samaritan leper]: Actually, this one was given much more than the rest. Besides being healed of his leprosy, he was told by the Lord, ‘Stand up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you.’ You see, those who give thanks and those who glorify have the same kind of feelings. They bless their helper for the benefits they have received. That is why Paul urged everybody to ‘glorify God with your body.’

Christ “loved,” in a special way, the Samaritan who returned to give thanks for his cleansing, his healing, his deliverance, his **salvation**. That doesn’t mean that the other nine did not go on the way of the rest of their life healed from leprosy, but their original leap of faith may never have borne the fullest fruit, because it **stopped** with that rejoicing in their own (relatively) good fortune, ignoring the fact of where it came from. Saint Athanasius attributes the “anger” of Christ to this ungratefulness, the lack of participating in the ongoing chorus of thanksgiving and mutual love to which God calls all of His creation. This is what Creation was made for, and - when we strive to become united with God, living in synergy with His gracious and loving will - this is what Creation is again called to be, despite the tragedy of the Fall of Man, as we are all called back to God through the Incarnation of Christ, His earthly life, death, and Resurrection...

But, how do we do this? What does the story of the ten lepers mean for us, today?

A couple of suggestions:

As one “starting-point,” which we can strive for in our daily lives: let always keep in mind that we are not justified by being “not-like-those-Samaritans” - that we are not made a Chosen People by merely being a church member, coming to services (when we feel like it), or

ascribing to a credal statement. There are no “cradle Orthodox” [*side explanation*]. All of us have been “grafted in” to Israel, as Saint Paul says. We all come as “foreigners,” and we come with our own leprosies. Our relationship with God can be seen in the story of the lepers, as a kind of image of our own condition: the Fathers often interpret leprosy as being a symbol of sinfulness, and, like sin, leprosy makes us “stand afar off” from Christ, until we follow his will for us, which will make us whole. We may have areas of failing, parts of our lives and souls which we have not yet given over to God fully, leaving us with leprous sores which need to be healed. Maybe we need to, each day, give our trust over fully to our Master, even when it seems like He has not even begun to heal us.

As we make this effort, we also can draw closer to Christ at “the gates of our village” - the village of our lives, our souls, our beings - by constantly making the conscious, often strenuous effort required in ***forgiving other people***, daily, for whatever wrongs we may have been done, whatever we have suffered from sin. Keeping in mind our own leprous sores and need for healing and cleansing, let us not judge, not hold the grudge, but forgive, and let go, and seek our own healing, wherever we stand in need of the Physician’s cure.

Finally, we have a great help in the Jesus Prayer itself. Like the ten lepers and the other examples in the Gospel, we may cry out, “*Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,*” wherever we are... aloud, if possible, inwardly, if not. By realizing our own need and brokenness, and hoping always in the overflowing mercy of Christ, we may, gradually, more and more, draw near to our God in love, faith, and humility.

Let us do so, Sisters and Brothers, with the faith of the ten, on each day, in every moment, that we may bring to mind all God’s great gifts, with the thanksgiving of the Samaritan. For,

even now, even when it seems like our sores are at their unchanging worst, if we draw near to Christ and trust Him, healing will begin.

*Through the prayers of our holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and save us.
Amen.*