

Twenty Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

There are some weeks when it is easier to give thanks to God than others. This week was one of those for me. It was a week when I could be on retreat, listening more intently to what God wanted to say to me. I was in a beautiful place near the beach. I had many places to walk. There were birds around me almost all the time. And I only got caught in the rain once. While the prayer was challenging me to look hard at how I was living now and preparing me for the changes that will come as I prepare for retirement, there were a lot of moments when I just thanked God for who God is for me.

But not everybody remembers to give thanks to God as we see in the second part of today's gospel. Jesus was travelling along the border between Samaria and Galilee when ten lepers cried out to be pitied. In the time of Jesus anyone suffering from a skin disease was called a leper. One of the worst things about being called a leper was that it meant being cut off from the wider community. In a leper colony the divisions between Jews and others were broken down and so we see that there was a Samaritan among the Jews there. A Samaritan was like a hybrid Jew, descended from the Israelites who were not deported to Babylon. They became a mixed race that were despised by the Jews. Jesus told the ten to show themselves to the priests. They were the only ones who could give them a clearance to say that they were

healed and so could return to their community. In their obedience to the command to go off and do that, they all found that they were healed. This first part of the gospel is like any other healing story.

But in the second part of the story something else happens. Only one of the ten, and this man was a despised Samaritan, came back to give thanks to God for his healing. Jesus then sent him on his way telling him that it was his faith that had saved him. Only this man had the depth of faith to express his thanks to Jesus and to the God who was at work in him. True faith cannot help but give thanks to God. True faith moves our hearts to recognise where God is at work in our lives and to respond to what we see with thanks. That it was a Samaritan who had this kind of faith makes us all think again about where faith can be found.

When do we give thanks to God? Does it happen that we sometimes get so overwhelmed by something good or beautiful that we cannot help but thank God for what we experience? Are there times when we are moved to give thanks to God when we received the good news that we have longed to hear or when we are told that something has happened for which we have dearly prayed? I hope those times have been many.

Our first reading today is about a person of faith who desires to give thanks for what God had done for him. He, like the men in our gospel, was a leper. But like the Samaritan in our gospel, Naaman was also a foreigner. Naaman wants to give the prophet Elisha a gift in thanks for his part in what had happened for him. Elisha wasn't comfortable about that at all. "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will accept nothing." So Naaman asks if he could take home with him as much earth as two mules could carry to worship the God of Israel who had healed him. He needed to take home the soil from Israel, because in the mind of the Israelites of that time, the God of Israel could only be worshipped in Israel. The Israelites still had a lot to learn about their God. It was only in the darkness of the Babylonian exile that they came to understand the God of Israel was also the God of the Babylonians. Wherever they were and whoever they were they could worship the God who had been revealed to Abraham and his descendants.

I think that this is something that most of us still find hard to accept. We claim God to be our own. We can't get our head around the fact that the same God that we worship is the God that the faithful Jew or Hindu or Muslim worships. We say that there is only one God, but we want everybody to find that God in the same way that we have found God. But nobody finds God. God finds us, no matter who we are. What we thank God for today

is the richness of the culture that has allowed us to know and to love God. Today we need to thank God for everyone who has made it possible for us to believe in God. God has found us through our parents and grandparents. God has found us through those people of faith who have lived their faith in love, whoever they are. God still finds us through this community of faith that gathers for the Eucharist each week. When we discover that God has found us, then our response must be a prayer of thanks. That is why we come here.

In today's reading from St. Paul's letter to Timothy he urges Timothy to remember the good news that he carries "Jesus Christ risen from the dead sprung from the race of David." He then quotes part of a hymn that the community prayed. "If we have died with him, then we shall live with him. If we hold firm, then we shall reign with hi. If we disown him, then he will disown us. We may be unfaithful, but he is always faithful, for he cannot disown his own self." We can sing that hymn today as a great prayer of thanks for the faithful love that God has for us no matter what.