

ZE10100506 - 2010-10-05

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-30553?l=english>

A Day of Remembering

Biblical Reflection for 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, OCT. 5, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Today's readings are about remembering and thanksgiving, healing and salvation.

In the Old Testament reading, (Second Kings 5:14-17) Naaman the Syrian remembers to thank Elisha for his cure, and one of the 10 lepers cured by Jesus remembered to turn up and thank his healer. In the reading from the Second Letter to Timothy (8-13), Paul asks Timothy (and us) to remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. Recalling Jesus' death and resurrection fills us with gratitude, heals and strengthens us to face any adversity, difficulty and suffering, thus making us people of gratitude.

Naaman's double cleansing

First let us consider the Old Testament reading. The imposing person of Naaman is told by the Prophet Elisha that he should seven times bathe in the Jordan River to be healed of his leprosy. Naaman replied indignantly, "Are not the rivers of Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be cleansed?" (Second Kings 5:12). Naaman was right: the rivers of Syria were undoubtedly better: They had more water; they were no match hygienically for the mountain spring waters of Damascus; ritually, it is the other way around.

Naaman was disappointed and expected this "man of God," Elisha, to perform a much more dramatic sign. Naaman even doubted the advice that he had received from the prophet. With great reluctance, he finally gives in to the pleading of his servants to do what the prophet said. Washing in the Jordan he was healed and his flesh became like that of a little child. The muddy waters cleansed Naaman of his leprosy -- but even more so of his arrogance.

The two mule-loads of earth that he requests will enable him to take a bit of Israelite earth to his native Syria, where he will build in Aram an altar to the God of Israel. Naaman has seen the power of the God of Israel and will worship none other. This is the final and most important lesson that he learns. Naaman, the foreigner, is not a member of the Chosen People. That God's mercy is to be extended to all the nations was a notion difficult for Israel to accept.

Along the journey to Jerusalem

Let us situate today's Gospel (Luke 17:11-19) in Luke's narrative. Today's passage begins with the line: "As Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem." This is a reminder to us that Jesus is moving toward his passion, and this clearly rises above the words and events of this entire section of Luke's Gospel (17:11-18:30). Most of the material in this section is unique to Luke. In 17:11 Luke can almost see Jerusalem in the distance and he points it out to the reader. This section will end in 18:30 because in 18:31, "Behold we are going up to

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Jerusalem,” Jesus will not leave the meaning of the journey to the disciples’ memory; he will prophesy for the third and final time his passion in the Holy City.

One grateful leper

Today’s incident of the cleansed and grateful Samaritan leper is narrated only in Luke’s Gospel and provides an instance of Jesus holding up a non-Jew (17:18) as an example to his Jewish contemporaries (cf. 10:33) where a similar purpose is achieved in the story of the Good Samaritan. Moreover, it is the faith in Jesus manifested by the foreigner that has brought him salvation (17:19).

Geography plays a special role in Luke’s Gospel and it can be literary, theological or physical. In today’s story, the border between Galilee and Samaria is a fitting location for a story involving both Jesus and a Samaritan (verse 16). Lepers kept a distance from non-lepers (verse 12; Leviticus 13:45-46; Numbers 5:2), they formed their own colonies (Second Kings 7:3), and they positioned themselves near busy intersections and highways in order to beg for alms. To show oneself to a priest after healing was according to the law (Leviticus 14:2-32).

Understanding a complex story

Today’s Gospel nevertheless raises several significant questions. Was the Samaritan, who lived outside the requirements of Judaism, included in the command to go to a priest? Why did Jesus reproach the nine for not returning (verses 17-18) when they had been told to go show themselves to a priest for a confirmation of their cure and a release from the status of uncleanness? Jesus’ words to the returning Samaritan: “Your faith has made you well,” seem rather odd, since all of them were healed!

Today’s Gospel must be understood as having two distinct parts: verses 11-14 and 15-19. The first part is a healing story with the standard elements: a cry for help; the response of Jesus; a healing in the act of obedience similar to that of 5:12-16. The second part of the story is the salvation of a foreigner. It is the foreigner who returns, who praises God and who expresses gratitude to Jesus. When Jesus says: “Your faith has made you well,” the blessing certainly refers to some benefit other than that which all, including the other nine, had received earlier. The verb “made well” is the same very often translated “to be saved.”

Salvation by faith

Today’s Gospel is about a foreigner with two counts against him; he received salvation by faith. The man was a Samaritan, a social outcast and a religious heretic suffering from leprosy. In the presence of Jesus, only the foreigner receives the full blessing of Jesus’ ministry. Once again Luke’s predilection for foreigners, outsiders, outcasts, the sick and sinners is very evident in this story.

This story anticipates the great story of the Acts of the Apostles: a growing blindness in Israel, and a receptivity among Gentiles. God’s plan to save the world excludes no one. The healing of the 10 lepers builds on the theme of this universality by implying that the “foreigner” was the only one to return and give thanks to God for the healing received. The implication is clear, and Jesus makes it at other times as well: If those to whom the word of salvation came first did not accept it, it will nevertheless be broadcast to all the world. It is a bitter irony for all of us, that it was the leaders of Jesus’ own people who rejected him!

God’s generosity is ungrudging and his mercy is showered upon all, both the grateful and the ungrateful. Nine of the 10 lepers healed did not return to praise God for their healing. Nevertheless, they are healed, and the wideness of God’s mercy is exalted even in their ingratitude, and ours. Both the Naaman story and the parable of the 10 lepers teach us some powerful lessons about remembrance, gratitude, healing and salvation.

Signs of gratitude

Thankfulness is much more than saying "Thank you" because we have to. It is a way to experience the world, to perceive and to be surprised. Thankfulness is having open eyes and a short distance between the eyes and the heart. What are the signs of grateful people? Tears are always wiped away from the eyes of those who are thankful. The courage to thank, to see the gifts and experiences of this world all together as a gift, changes not only the person who gains this insight. It also changes the environment, the world, and those who surround that person. Grateful hearts are the hallmark of authentic Christians. Those who possess the virtue of gratitude are truly rich. They not only know how richly they have been blessed, but they continuously remember that all good things come from God.

To acknowledge others, to say thank you to others is the mark of greatness. If people associated with us are dispirited, dejected, unmotivated and uninspired, might it have something to do with the fact that we have never expressed our thanks and gratitude to them for who they are and what they do? People bound together by gratitude are always discovering and awakening abundant sources of strength. The more thankful a person is, the richer he or she is within. Thankful people store up in their grateful memory all the good experiences of the past, just as the French proverb states: "Gratitude is the heart's memory."

Brother André Bessette of Montreal

Next Sunday, Oct. 17, the Church will celebrate the canonization of Canadian-born Blessed André Bessette, known and loved as "Brother André of Montreal." He is known and loved to millions of people in North America and throughout the world, especially for his devotion to St. Joseph. I have written about him several times over the past months leading up to his canonization.

Today's Scripture readings made me think of Brother André many times. He was afflicted with suffering throughout his entire life, yet he brought healing to so many people through his strong faith, simple piety and devotion. It is only fitting that the miracle leading to his canonization occurred in 1999 when a 9-year-old boy had been the victim of an automobile accident, leaving him with a serious cranial injury and putting him in an irreversible coma leading toward death. The prayers of the people closest to him, along with the intercession of Brother André, brought him back to consciousness and health, and this was deemed scientifically unexplainable by medical experts.

Why was André chosen?

In a beautiful circular letter to the Holy Cross family earlier this year, former Holy Cross Superior-General Father Hugh Cleary wrote:

"... perhaps Andre was chosen, like Mary and Joseph, because in the eyes of this world he was no one; he possessed nothing, nothing possessed him. As one depleted of all discernible gifts, talents and possessions, he was ripe for God's prey. In his nothingness he had no choice but to pray; his own preying was an abysmal failure. In the hallow emptiness of his existence, he had no choice but to pray to God to give him what he desired more than anything else. God answered his prayer. God possessed him giving him what he cared for most, giving him fulfillment to the deepest longing of his heart."

God's ways are not our ways

"... Miracle workers like Brother Andre are few and far between, rarely encountered in the natural course of events. But when they do appear, they point us beyond the natural realm of hunting for power, pleasure and

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wealth, as if the answers to our deepest longing. Miracle workers point us to the transcendent realm of reality, the 'normal' course of God's grace forever preying upon us gently, subtly, in sometimes hardly perceptible ways, to live the Love that is indeed our deepest longing. We cannot possess this Love with our own preying, our own machinations. This Love is a gift, freely given, a gift that transcends our frail human nature. This Love lifts us beyond our natural selves to our Heavenly glory as the children of God."

Immersed in the waters of God's Word

Blessed André Besette, soon to be St. André of Montreal, is a brilliant example of one who immersed himself day after day in "waters of Israel," the divinely inspired Scriptures. He allowed God to work through his poor, humble, weak being to heal physical suffering and disease, as well as the leprosy of sin in his day. As Brother André remembered and gave thanks for the hand of God working through him, and through St. Joseph's intercession, he brought healing and salvation to the multitudes.

[The readings for this Sunday are Second Kings 5:14-17; Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4; Second Timothy 2:8-13; and Luke 17:11-19]

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Salt and Light Catholic Television Network Web site: www.saltandlighttv.org

For more information on Canada's first native-born male saint: www.saltandlighttv.org/brotherandre/

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