

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time C - Gratitude is the best Attitude and the Virtue of Joy

October 9, 2022.

Happy Thanksgiving to all fellow Canadians. (US will be celebrating on November 24.) This Sunday's first reading (2 Kings 5:14-17) and the Gospel reading (Luke 17:11-19) are usually picked for Thanksgiving weekend mass celebration. Both readings talk about lepers. Leprosy is a bacterial infection that causes the extremities of the body - fingers and toes, hands and feet, nose, ears, and mouth - to die and slowly rot away, even while the person remains alive. It was so contagious that even the lepers' closest relatives did not dare to come near them. In ancient times, lepers were required to live in isolated colonies. If they had to travel, the law required them to ring a bell wherever they went, shouting out, "Unclean! Unclean!" This explains why the ten lepers addressed Christ "from a distance", as St Luke points out. On top of the isolation, lepers had to live with the almost unbearable pain and stench of their own decaying bodies. Leprosy was a long, humiliating, and dismal agony, the most horrible of ancient diseases.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus cured ten lepers from their agony, giving them a brand new life. And yet, only one takes the trouble to thank him for it - and that one happens to be a Samaritan, the one least likely to respect a Jewish rabbi. Christ wants to use the incident to teach us about **gratitude**. We can almost hear the sadness in Christ's heart at the lack of gratitude in the other nine who were healed. Why does Christ value gratitude so much? It's because he wants to show us **gratitude is valuable for the health of our souls**. Gratitude keeps us grounded in the truth, which is key for our ongoing relationship with God. The fact that we Catholics come together for the celebration of the eucharist makes it clear that the giving of thanks to God is an essential part of our worship and prayer life. To be ungrateful to God is not only unjust, but it's also living on illusion. **Everything we have is a gift from God: creation, life, talents, opportunities, hope in heaven, the grace that helps us persevere in doing what is right - these are all God's gifts. We don't create ourselves!** Gratitude is also the perfect antidote to sin. Sin turns us in on ourselves, like an ingrown toenail; **gratitude opens us up to God and neighbour. It directly contradicts self-centredness, self-indulgence, and self-absorption. It builds bridges, unites communities, and softens hearts. It counteracts depression and releases anxiety. Gratitude is one of the most beautiful flowers in the garden of virtue - what a pity that it's so rare!**

In the first reading, we read about Naaman an officer in the Syrian army. He's an effective commander and had won many victories. But there's one battle he could not win – leprosy. His wife, however, had a Jewish servant girl who told him that there's a prophet in Israel who could cure him. Buoyed by this hope, Naaman went to see him. When he arrived though, the prophet told him to do something strange. He said ***Go and wash in the Jordan River 7 times, and you will be healed.*** This sounds ridiculous to Naaman, and he only agreed after his servants reminded him that he had nothing to lose. He did as told and was healed. Like the Samaritan in the gospel reading, Naaman appreciated what the Lord had done for him through the prophet Elisha. He wanted to thank the prophet. More than this, he wanted to thank the God of Israel whom the prophet called upon to heal him. Along with his presents for Elisha, he brought soil from Israel home to Syria with him so that every day he could thank God on the soil of these chosen people.

Gratitude is the reservoir for joy. A verse from the Letter to the Hebrews sums up the power of gratitude: ***"What gives true strength to a man's heart...is gratitude"*** (Hebrews 13:9). Gratitude is like the river that feeds a huge reservoir of water. If we dam up that river, the reservoir will continue to be useful for a while. But little by little it will dry up. If we neglect the virtue of gratitude, that's what happens to our souls. They dry up, because they aren't being irrigated by the knowledge that we are loved. **The virtue of gratitude keeps us in tune with this most important of facts: God loves us, thinks about us, cares about us, is interested in us. God's capacity for love is infinite. Knowing that we are loved by God, then, is the only way to satisfy one of the two deepest needs of the human heart: the need to know that we are loved without limit**

and without conditions. Gratitude keeps our attention on God's goodness to us, on the expressions of his love for us. It makes sure we never forget that we are loved - which is the only source of lasting joy in this world full of difficulties. When we neglect it, we start focusing on ourselves, on our own achievements, on our own desires - but none of those things can satisfy this fundamental need of our soul. Just as no reservoir can keep itself full - it needs to be fed by a source outside itself, higher than itself. When we find ourselves becoming habitually bitter, angry, frustrated, stressed, or depressed, it's because our reservoir is getting low. That's when we need to look back to God and his love, and open the floodgates of gratitude. God wants us to develop the virtue of gratitude because he wants us to experience the joy that comes from knowing we are loved by him without limits or conditions. As mentioned before, this Sunday's first reading (2 Kings 5:14-17) offers a perfect illustration of how to receive the gifts of God with gratitude.

As Pope Francis said (general audience 30 December 2020): "..... And Jesus points out that the man was a Samaritan, a sort of "heretic" for the Jews of that time. Jesus comments: **Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?**" (Luke 17:18). This narrative is touching. This narrative, so to speak, divides the world in two: those who do not give thanks and those who do. The *Catechism* says: **every event and need can become an offering of thanksgiving**" (n. 2638). The prayer of thanksgiving always begins from here: from the recognition that grace precedes us. We were thought of before we learned how to think; we were loved before we learned how to love; we were desired before our hearts conceived a desire. If we view life like this, then "thank you". how often we even forget to say "thank you". **Christians, as all believers, bless God for the gift of life. To live is above all to have received life. All of us are born because someone wanted us to have life. "thank you" becomes the driving force of our day. This "thank you" that we must say continually, this thanks that Christians share with everyone, grows in the encounter with Jesus...."**

Brothers and sisters, like every virtue, gratitude can only grow if we exercise it. How do we do it? There is nothing easier. All we have to do is say thank you - and mean it. And it is never too late to say thank you. In fact, the sweetness of gratitude, like the taste of wine, only improves over time. We have all received a note of thanks at some time in our life, long after we had performed the favour. When that thank you note arrives, it warms our heart, because it shows that our action lasted, that someone was thinking of us long after the favour was done. This week, let's warm someone else's heart by saying thank you. We owe a debt of gratitude to so many people: first of all, our parents, through whom God has given us so many gifts: life, education, faith... Truly, **the virtue of gratitude is at the very core of our spiritual lives**; then our siblings, spouse and friends who care and support us in our journey of life in both suffering and joy; our teachers and coaches, and all those people who dedicated themselves to us in our years of education; our first boss, who was patient with us and gave us a second chance; the relative or neighbour who inspired us with their good example; the soldiers who have fought to protect our freedom; the police, firefighters, and health care workers who dedicate themselves to keeping our communities safe and prosperous; the authors of those books that have given us joy and inspiration... As St Paul reminds us in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: **Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**" So at the end of each day, let's dedicate a few minutes to reviewing the gifts God has given us, and thanking him for them. This keeps our hearts alive with gratitude. **It's vital to form the habit of thanking God throughout the day. When something good happens, say "Thank you Jesus for your friendship and your love." When something unpleasant happens, say "Thank you Jesus, for your friendship and your love."** Jesus reminds us in this Sunday's Gospel that gratitude is a Christian virtue, that his followers should spread the aroma of gratitude in this thankless world, for our own good, and for the good of those around us. We should never let a day pass without thanking God for the good things in life and for the crosses and trials that put us to the test. God bless.