

JUST LIKE THE REST OF MEN

“Only someone who has encountered mercy, who has been caressed by the tenderness of mercy, is happy and comfortable with the Lord”.

– Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, April 27, 2001



It is only the Gospel of Luke which relates to us the story of how Our Lord, on one occasion, healed ten lepers (Lk. 17:11-19). And we are told that of the ten who were healed only one returned to offer Our Lord thanks for this miraculous gift. If we place this episode within the historical context of the times of our Lord and make use of a little historical imagination, I don't think it is all that difficult for us to come to an understanding of why it was that the one leper felt compelled to return and offer thanks and the other nine did not. The Gospel lets us know that the one who returned was a Samaritan. And we know from the Gospels themselves, and from other historical sources as well, that the Samaritans were deeply despised and hated by the Jews. The Samaritans were a mixed population made up of the Jews who escaped deportation at the time of the Assyrian conquest in the 8th century B.C. and the other foreign peoples that the Assyrians sent to occupy the land. One will find various references in the New Testament that indicate just how deeply the Samaritans were despised. So, for example, when some of the Jews wanted to insult Our Lord and express

their contempt for Him, they could find no better way than to call him a "Samaritan" (Jn. 8:48). And then we also possess extra-biblical sources indicating the same deep hostility and hatred. There is one ancient saying of a Rabbi that goes: "It is better to eat pork with the pagans than to break bread with a Samaritan". That is very strong language from a Jew! So given this deep hostility that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans, when this Samaritan leper finds that he has been restored to perfect health by this Jewish prophet he is overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude – he has been completely cured by someone whom he would normally consider to be his mortal enemy. And so, no doubt, this Samaritan would have a very keen sense that he had absolutely no claim to the goodness and mercy that he received from this Jewish prophet. In all likelihood the other nine lepers were Jews and so in their own minds they thought they possessed a certain claim to the healing they received. In all likelihood they were saying to themselves: "we are descendants of Abraham; we are members of the chosen race; we possess the law and the prophets and know what is pleasing to God;

we are not like that despicable, heretic Samaritan”. So among the Jewish lepers there would have been a sense of entitlement: they were among God’s chosen ones and so they deserved to be healed. With this kind of mentality it shouldn’t be surprising that none of them returned to offer thanks.

Recently I was introduced to a Catholic author by the name of Heather King. Heather King is a very intelligent woman who became a lawyer and who practiced law for a time before she decided to become a writer. She grew up as a Protestant in southern New Hampshire and as a young woman she lived a very promiscuous life during which time she admits to having had three abortions. She became an alcoholic and lived as an alcoholic for 20 years, almost killing herself in the process. So she is someone who experienced firsthand the depths of despair and who came to know the deep suffering that comes with the life of sin. But she was able, eventually, with the help of her family and with the help of other recovering alcoholics to get herself sober. A little later in life she had a profound conversion and an experience of Christ’s mercy and she found her way into the Catholic Church. And she writes about her interior life and especially about her tremendous sense of loneliness and inner brokenness in a way that I find very refreshing because of her openness and honesty. And her experience made it clear to her that she had absolutely no claim to the mercy of Christ that she experienced; she knew from the inside that she was given a great, unmerited grace which she in no way earned or deserved. So in other words, she recognized herself as a modern-day Samaritan leper who was healed by Christ’s touch and her heart is clearly full of gratitude because of the healing she received.

And I think that this kind of testimony, this kind of witness to God’s grace, can be very helpful to those of us who may have never experienced the depths of the darkness and despair of the Heather Kings of this

world. It can be very easy for those of us who have not had this kind of experience to secretly and perhaps even unconsciously believe that somehow we have a claim to God’s grace; somehow we are different. Cradle Catholics are perhaps especially prone to a sense of entitlement. When our Lord tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector he has the Pharisee say: “I thank thee Lord that I am not like the rest of men” (Lk. 18:11). There can be various possible causes for this kind of attitude. Naturally, there is the problem of pride. But another possible cause of this attitude of the Pharisee, to which we are all prone, is often a deep fear – a fear that if we look deep inside we may actually discover that we are like the rest of men, that we also are just as much in need of God’s grace as the poor lost souls whom we see out in the world: the drug addicts or the people living on the streets or the low-life criminals – and it may even be that we will discover that we are just as much in need of God’s grace as the other people with whom we live and associate every day! It can be a fearful thing to come to the realization that we have just as little claim and just as great a need of God’s grace as the rest of men do. But this truth about ourselves, this true self knowledge, is actually a great liberating truth: it is the truth that frees us from the illusions we have about ourselves and the illusions we have about our relationship to God and, above all, it frees us so that we can experience God’s merciful love for us. And this true self knowledge can bring tremendous peace to the soul. If we can manage to let go of our need to be different from the rest of men and if we can come to know that we are just like others and just as much in need of God’s unmerited grace then it may also be possible for us to experience the gratitude and love of the Samaritan leper.

“If God is for us, who can be against us?”

