

Did you say thank you?

Growing up, many of us would have been asked this question and it's a question we ask our children especially when friends and family give them gifts. And if they had not said thank you, they will often be chastised for their bad manners.

Nine of those ten lepers would presumably have been suitably chastised by their mothers. We can almost imagine the conversation going thus:

Mother: 'Well, I hope you said thank you?' To which those naughty boys would have to admit, 'Er, no mum.' At which point they would probably have received a clip around the ear and been sent to their bedroom, without any tea!

And that would be the end of it.

We would however be doing this story a disfavor if we limit its interpretation and probably lessons to that of thanks giving alone. I believe there is more to it than this.

The mention of the tribe of leper who said thank you should probably give us an inclination into another essence of the story.

Reference to Samaria and lepers should remind us of earlier incidents in Luke's Gospel. In Luke 5.12-16, Jesus healed a leper in Galilee. In Luke 9.51-56, a Samaritan village refused hospitality to Jesus and his disciples who were travelling to Jerusalem. This is a reflection of the age-old hostility between peoples with common ancestry and divergent histories.

The Samaritans lived in the region of Samaria, formerly the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians captured Samaria in 721 BC,

deported much of the population and resettled the city with foreigners (2 Kings 17.6, 24ff.). The city had been religiously diverse from its foundation by King Omri in about 880 BC.

In the post-Assyrian period, Yahweh worshippers established their own temple on Mount Gerizim, independent of Jerusalem, and their own translation of the books of Moses. Jews regarded Samaritans as foreigners, and treated them with contempt.

In this week's Gospel, Jesus is in no-man's land, 'on the way to Jerusalem...between Samaria and Galilee' (v.11). It was here that he met the lepers who maintained a form of three-fold distance from Christ. Firstly, it is cultural because they are foreign. Secondly, it is religious because they are marginalized by the purity regulations in the laws of Moses. Thirdly, it is physical because their condition may be contagious.

Remarkably Jesus tells them to act as if they are healed. On this occasion, there is no need to touch them. His word is enough to send them off to the priests, whose endorsement of their cleansing will pave the way for their reintegration into village life.

Every so often, when we pray for healing, we are tempted to expect a physical manifestation. However, this story shows that there is more to healing than cure. Disease affects the social as well as the individual body. And healing in its fullest sense brings inner and outer worlds together. This is the essence of Jesus' healing ministry. He reintegrates mind and body, flesh and spirit, person and community.

So, Jesus through His spoken words performed an extra-ordinary healing of the ten with only one being thankful for it. Luke could probably have informed his readers (and us) that only one of the lepers was thankful, but he specifically drew their attention to the fact that it was a Samaritan, a foreigner from the enemy tribe that was appreciative of this miracle. Why was Luke very specific in mentioning that it was the Samaritan that came back?

There are many possible answers.

The first is that Luke been a Gentile wanted to lay emphasis on the inclusive nature of the ministry of Christ. In healing the Samaritan, Jesus shows that his ministry is not limited to Jews alone.

Another answer is that probably because the others being Jews, have taken God's kindness and blessings for granted. As it is often said, "too much familiarity, breeds contempt and disrespect". The other nine lepers are familiar with who Jesus is. They probably saw it as their birthright as Jews, the chosen ones to receive such healing.

Irrespective of why Luke specified the identity of the Samaritan, apart from the necessity and importance of saying thank you to God not only for the big things and events in life, we could learn to say thank you for the small mercies of each day. We could say thank you to the privilege of been born or residing in a country peaceful country such as ours. I am sure none of us chose to be born here and neither did those who are born in places like

Aleppo in Syria. Hence, we should be grateful to God for all we have in this country despite its many imperfections.

Such thank you should not be in our private prayer moments alone. They could be public testimonies of God's goodness to us, not as boastful statements but as an acknowledgment of His mercies.

Another important lesson could be on the subject of healing. When praying for healing, we should always bear in mind that there are times when healing is neither physical nor immediate. Our prayers should be that God should do the healing in His ways and time.

From the passage we could also learn the importance of the inclusive nature of God. In Christ, there is no Jew or Gentile, white or black. God is the God of those in the Church and outside of it. Therefore we should not limit God to our own understandings alone.

This story is the story of crossing boundaries. Who are those that are outside of the artificial boundaries that our society has constructed. What are the boundaries we have placed around ourselves? Our churches? Who are the lepers? Who are the Samaritans? Who are those who are in no man's land of life? Who are those who physically, religious or socially are excluded? How could we meet them where they are to show them the love and acceptance that comes with Christ?