Sunday 9th October 2022: 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus is continuing his journey to Jerusalem this Sunday as he meets the ten lepers and heals them. This episode is unique to the Gospel of Luke. For this encounter only Jesus and the lepers are involved, there is no mention of disciples or Pharisees. The previous episode concluded a teaching to the disciples as we saw last week. The Pharisees are again questioning Jesus as the following episode begins as we will explore next week. As a result, this encounter with the lepers is best read as an incident on its own with only weak links to the surrounding context.

Leprosy in the ancient world did not have the precision of today's medicine. It covered a wide range of skin disorders which described in quite explicit detail in the book of Leviticus. Some skin diseases duly cured in time and this would be certified by the priests. Others could well be incurable, contagious and a danger to others. Isolation of the sick person is the only response. We have a parallel here with initial reactions to COVID and the resulting isolation which is still required. But at least in our time we have many means of communication not available to the ancients; they could only shout. For them, a skin disease meant isolation from one's community as the only way of protecting the community; salvation therefore means restoration to the community. In a healing earlier in the Gospel, Jesus touched the leper and so broke boundaries. Here in a more traditional way, the ten keep their distance as they cry for mercy.

As usual we need to look at translations of the key words. For the leper's cry, some translations speak of "have mercy", others "have pity". Then at the end, when Jesus says "your faith has saved you", alternatives are "made you well"or similar. I prefer "mercy" and "save" because these words have a clear biblical meaning. It is certainly strange that the NRSV has "made you well" at the end when the Greek is clearly "has saved you", "saved" being an important word in this Gospel right from the beginning. An added subtlety is that the same word means both "healed" and "saved".

This is another Luke two part story, as we have seen with the prodigal son or the rich man and Lazarus. The scene is set in the first part where all ten lepers are cleansed. The stress therefore is on the second part, the healing of the Samaritan and his response. The nine presumably all Jews had enough faith or trust in Jesus to seek healing from him. Yet they were content to follow established procedures by going to the priests to be certified as cured. They would have the offered the prescribed sacrifices and would have been restored to their families.

In the second part, one healed leper returns to Jesus glorifying God. He fell at the feet of Jesus (the alternative "prostrate" has overtones of worship which are not appropriate here) and thanked him. It then turns out that this man is a Samaritan to whom Jesus then calls a foreigner. My reading of this would place the emphasis not on being a Samaritan but rather on being a foreigner, a stranger to the Jewish community. Read in light of Luke's own community several decades later, this can be read as a call to the community to be open to foreigners, the call to be saved by Jesus is inclusive not exclusive. Jesus therefore says to the healed leper "Rise and go your way. Your faith has saved you." As happens quite frequently, "get up" misses

the point. "Your faith has saved you" is used three times in the Gospel. Only here is the phrase linked with the resurrection, an important connection, unique to Luke. This also provides a connection between this leper's faith and the apostles request for faith in the previous scene.

It is not surprising the Old Testament reading accompanying this Gospel is the healing of the Syrian General Naaman from the book of Kings. Jesus refers to this healing in his inaugural sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth. The reading this Sunday just gives the end of the story, with Naaman bathing in the Jordan and being washed clean. He then takes the earth with him because it is on that earth he can offer sacrifice to the one God of Israel. With this conclusion, the echo of baptism is clear in Christian tradition. Naaman's progress to this point can be seen as parallel to the progress of the convert as he or she becomes a catechumen preparing to be baptised. It is as well to read the whole story with that in mind. On the way Naaman has much to learn, first and foremost that he cannot buy his way into salvation. On being told by a slave girl that he might be healed by Elisha the prophet, Naaman brings with him a great deal of money and asked the king of Israel to heal him. That just made the king angry but Elisha then told the king to send Naaman to him. Elisha just sent a messenger out to Naaman telling him to wash in the Jordan. That just made Naaman angry, the waters of Damascus were good enough he thought. Yet his servants told him he would have done something difficult so why not do the simple thing required. So he did with success and only then did he meet Elisha. Naaman's story of his conversion reminds us how we can make the way to salvation something of an obstacle course. It is simply a matter of letting go and being open to God: "your faith has saved you".

This Sunday, the key word in the readings is "salvation", the salvation which is in Christ Jesus as St Paul tells us writing to Timothy. "The Lord has shown his salvation to the nations."