

SERMON FOR THE 15TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Cape Town - 13 September 2009)

Text: ¹¹ Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" ¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. ¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? ¹⁸ Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:11-19)

We have a remarkable cleaning lady at our house. Her name is Gertrud. She lives in Kayalitsha and comes to our house every Thursday morning. What I find remarkable about Gertrud is that she seems so happy. When the sun shines, she greets me in the morning: "Hallo Pastor, it is a nice today". When it rains, she says: "Oooh, the weather isn't so good today, Pastor" - but smiles nevertheless.

On one of those rainy days, when I was all morbid about the terrible weather, I asked Gertrud what her living conditions at home are like. "Aah", she said, "the roof is leaking, Pastor". So one day I decided to go and have a look. I was shocked. There is a hole as large as a brick in the roof. As a result of the water, the sealing inside the house is drooping. I believe, it could come crashing down any moment. The wooden frame of the front window is totally rotten. When it rains, it rains straight through the bottom panel of the window into the lounge.

I stood there open mouthed. I knew Gertrud doesn't get much support. Her husband left her a few years ago. He lives around the corner in a rather smart house with his new mistress. In the house with Gertrud are five children and two grand children. And her husband doesn't pay any maintenance for looking after the family.

But Gertrud smiles. It touches me. Compared to her I live in total luxury. And she - living on the margins of society - seems far grateful for what she has. And when we do give her some extras, like clothing, she literally jumps with joy.

In our sermon text we also have people living on the margins of society. As in most cases they are not there because they brought it upon themselves. It is rather a matter of life giving them a raw deal. In their case, these ten men, had leprosy. They didn't have what we today call "Hansen's disease", the technical term for leprosy. They just had some kind of a skin disease. And there was a law given by God to Moses that people with an *infectious* skin disease must live outside the camp. They had to wear torn clothing and when people accidentally came too close to them, they had to shout: "Unclean, unclean". Once the infection healed they had to present themselves to the priest to be accepted back into the camp and community.

It all sounds a bit cruel, doesn't it? But these regulations were given to prevent an infection of spreading. Over the years, however, the people of Israel turned this law into something terrible and cruel. They said, people with an infectious skin disease are unclean *before God*. In other words, their infection was caused by a sin. In simple terms, based on an every day skin infection, they declared these people to be morally not good enough to live amongst God's people.

That was the real pain ancient lepers experienced: We are not good enough for God. This pain

drew these communities even closer together. We discover later in our text that amongst the ten lepers, there is in fact one Samaritan. We know Jews and Samaritans hated each other. They didn't share the same space. But pain and hardship often obscures boundaries and brings people together. Sadly it is often people like us, the healthy and affluent, that draw these boundaries and great "exclusive" communities.

But Jesus enters the scene. It happens on the boarder between Galilee and Samaria, which in itself was maybe a bit of an undefined space. The ten lepers cry out to Jesus: "**Jesus, master, have pity (have mercy) on us**". It is a cry for physical healing. But it is also a cry to be reinstated into the community of God.

When we draw boundaries, Jesus crosses those boundaries. His very nature is mercy and he has pity especially for those on the margins of society. He says to the ten lepers: "**Go, show yourselves to the priests.**" And as they go, they are healed. He could have healed them on the spot, but they still had to go to the priest to be accepted back into the community. The source of their healing is not their big "faith", but simply the *mercy of Jesus*. Inevitably, as we see so often, his heart throbs with compassion, when people for whatever reason are excluded from God's community.

But the crux of this story is what happens *after he healing*. That is the focus. Of the ten men that are healed, of the ten men that experienced the mercy of Jesus, "one" goes back to Jesus. In fact, he postpones his journey to the priest. There is something far more important to him. He wants to give thanks to the person that had healed him.

So the Samaritan runs back. It seems, already on the way back he was shouting with joy. We read: "**He was praising God with a loud voice**". I can visualise people standing next to the road astonishingly listening to this man's praises.

By the way, praise of God is seldom confined to a small room. The very nature of praise is, that it wants to be shouted out - in public. We see it in the Psalms of David. He doesn't just say these Psalms behind locked doors. He writes them down with a note for the choir master: "A psalm to be sung", often even providing the tune. This is one reason why on a day like this God's people come together. We do so to combine our praises in a song.

When this man eventually finds Jesus, he falls down flat on his face. We read: "**He threw himself at Jesus' feet [...] and thanked him**". His song and his words of praise didn't serve the purposes of entertainment, applauded by others. They are just simple words that come straight from the heart: "**Thank you, Jesus**".

... And it was "*the Samaritan*" who thanked Jesus. It was the one person least expected to do so. But this grateful Samaritan is elevated as an example to God's people.

An example of what? An example of "faith". For the first time in our passage, we read something about "faith". Jesus says to the Samaritan: "**Rise and go; your faith has made you well**". Literally it says: "**You faith has saved you.**"

What do we learn?

First, I learn: Thankfulness is an expression of faith. Where there is faith, people are thankful. God does not “demand” thankfulness from anybody. That is not what he is like. But where there is faith, thankfulness is the natural result.

Secondly, I learn: Faith “saves”. Ten people were healed from their leprosy. But only one person was “saved”. Healing and saving is not the same. Maybe the other nine were - after Jesus’ intervention - physical healthy human beings again. But they never found God. The Samaritan had found God. And that is why he had received far more than physical healing. He had found salvation.

Thirdly, I learn: God himself is far more important than any “things” that I get from him. But this is our problem: So often we want “things” from God. In times of sickness, we want healing from God. In times of financial difficulty, we want money from God. In times of hardship, we want rescue from God. But do we want HIM?

Psalm 73 is a reflection on why sometimes the ungodly seem to enjoy greater prosperity in life. But the Psalmist on reflecting on all these “things” in life discovers: Far more important than having wealth and prosperity is having “God” in my life. He therefore writes: ***“If only I have you, earth has noting that I desire”*** (cf v. 25).

Whether we want “things” or “God” is often reflected in our prayers. The story goes that God dispatched two of his angels to collect in one basket all the “requests” that people have, and in another basket all words of “thanks”. And the two angels crossed the world. When they came back the basket of request was overflowing, but the basket of thanks was almost empty. Where there is faith, there are also words of “thanks”.

Remember to thank God. And thank him not only for what seems good to you, the success in your life. Thank him also for the thorn in your flesh. Faith sees in all circumstances of life, a God who loves us and works everything, even hardship, for the good of us. Faith sees God in the “small things” of life.

After this sermon we will sing the hymn, *“Now, thank we all our God”*. It was written by a Lutheran Pastor called Martin Rinkhart. He lived during what became known as “Thirty Year of War”, early in the 17th century. It was a terrible time. In 1637 when most pastors had already died or left the area, he still remained behind and buried 4000 people that year, 40 to 50 per day, including his wife. But it was in the midst of this violence that he wrote this hymn as a table grace for his family, *“Now, thank we all our God”*.

Don’t ask me how? Most people today don’t even say grace. But what I can deduce from this hymn is, that he had “faith” (trust) in a God who didn’t not even spare his only Son for our salvation. This faith was expressed in words of thanks. Amen.