

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY – C
October 14, 2007

As we listened to these readings today we might think the Church chose the wrong scriptures and should have kept these for Thanksgiving, which is well over a month away. And while that may be true, the Church isn't the least bit concerned about our national holidays and instead is trying to teach us the value of giving thanks, no matter what the time of year.

We hear and say the word *thanks* fairly often, though maybe not often enough and usually without much thought. We also don't stop to think that there are *spiritual* aspects to giving thanks.

Last Sunday's Gospel parable about the master and the servant reminded us that we are God's servants and therefore we have no reason to expect God to thank us for doing what he asks of us. But while God may have no obligation to thank us, we have an obligation to thank God. These beautiful scripture readings today help us to understand better the rich biblical concept of thanksgiving.

The Hebrew word *hodah*, which is generally translated as "give thanks", means to "confess, profess or state *publicly*". In the Bible, to give thanks means to state publicly that at that moment God is at work. That particular moment could be the creation of the world, or ancient Israel's exodus from Egypt, certainly things to give thanks for. Or it could be for any one of us rescue from danger or recovery from illness. The idea of Thanksgiving in the Bible is directed to God, it involves a public profession, and is a profoundly religious action.

In the first reading, Naaman the Syrian had leprosy. Actually he could have had any kind of skin disease from poison ivy to the heartbreak of psoriasis, but in those days the people were so terrified by leprosy, which was highly contagious, that they viewed any skin disorder with extreme caution.

Anyway, Naaman is cured of his leprosy, and even though he is a gentile (a non-Jew), he somehow recognizes that the God of Israel was at work through the prophet Elisha. So he makes a public proclamation when he says, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel" and he promises to offer sacrifice only to their God.

Now this same idea of thanksgiving as a public declaration of God's goodness is expressed even more clearly in St. Luke's Gospel story today about the cleansing of the 10 lepers while Jesus is journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Ten people—we are not told their names or even their genders—suffering from what was considered leprosy approach Jesus but only come as close as they were allowed, since they were highly contagious and were not allowed to come in contact with the general public. Their plea is really quite sad, "Jesus, Master! Have pity on us."

Notice then how quickly and simply the cure takes place. Jesus doesn't do a rain dance or wave a magic wand, there's no lightning or thunder or trumpet fanfare or drum roll or anything dramatic like that. He just asks them to show themselves to the priests, which was standard procedure at the time because, according to the book of Leviticus, the priests would need to provide verification of their healing before they could return to normal life.

But the fact that Jesus doesn't use any explicit words or actions of healing is a vital part of the story, because the ten lepers head off to see the priests *even though Jesus has not indicated in any way that he has cured them*. Just following Jesus' instructions was an act of great faith, because they wouldn't have done so if they hadn't believed in his power to heal them.

The story could easily end here, but it doesn't. It actually gets better. Only one of the healed lepers returns to Jesus to give public witness to God's goodness. What's more remarkable, though, is that this person is a Samaritan. That might not mean much to us, but since Jesus was speaking to Jewish people—who hated the Samaritans, and vice versa—this was certainly a surprise ending to the story. It's also why Jesus makes that strange statement: "Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?"

For all of us, in thanking God we proclaim publicly who God is (our creator and redeemer), who we are (God's servants), and what God has done for us (given us life, love, and the opportunity for salvation). And this is exactly what we do here, each time we come together for Mass. We should never forget that the word "Eucharist" means thanksgiving, so each time we celebrate the Eucharist we are proclaiming God's magnificent acts of salvation, especially Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

St. Paul continues his letter to his friend and co-worker Timothy, some of which we heard last week. Paul wants to make it clear that even though he is still in prison, "the word of God is not chained" and he is convinced that his experience of the risen Christ had completely transformed his life and made possible his long and extensive ministry, which in effect was bearing public witness to what God had accomplished in him, through Christ.

We have a number of St. Paul's letters in the NT, and it's noteworthy that he began almost every letter with a word of thanks. No matter how dire the circumstances Paul found himself in, he knew how important it was to be thankful to God and to make this known publicly.

Perhaps it's not so strange at all that we would have these thanksgiving-like readings here today. It gives us the opportunity to think about the many things we can be thankful for *before* our holiday of Thanksgiving arrives, so we'll be ready then to praise God joyfully and publicly and like St. Paul, no matter how difficult things might be in our lives, we can still manage to be grateful to the God who continues to give us the blessings of life, love and salvation.