

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – October 13, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 675 words

The Church invites us to reflect today on the utter gratuity of God's gifts and our response to them. Naaman the Syrian, in the first reading, was a foreigner, not of the chosen people – yet, he was healed. He had no native claim on anything, but at the word of Elisha, the man of God, he was cleansed of the terrible disease of leprosy. In gratitude, he tried to give the prophet a gift, but he replied, "I will not take it": Elisha needed to teach Naaman that the gift of God is not only unmerited, but without cost.

The gospel tells a similar tale. The ten lepers – one of whom was a foreigner, a Samaritan – made bold and asked the Lord Jesus for healing, which he freely gave. This would have been astonishing enough for all who were present. But it was more surprising still that only the Samaritan returned to give thanks. Christ praised him for this and expressed his own wonderment at the lack of gratitude of the other nine, who were Jews, and who evidently took the great and free gift they had received for granted.

Yes, the story of the other nine shows us how ugly ingratitude can be. Socially, we are accustomed to saying "thank you" in all sorts of situations where gratitude is not really due. One of my favorite examples comes from when I go to visit my family: there is a \$2.00 toll to enter the State of New Hampshire on I-95. I give my money to the clerk and say "thank you". For what?! They should thank me! But it is a social courtesy. Oh, but how ugly it is when gratitude truly is due – and is not expressed!

That was the situation of those nine, and our Lord was evidently saddened. But did he take back his healing gift? No. There is no indication of that whatsoever. He gave generously and he gave freely. He gave knowing that some would not appreciate it, that some would be ungrateful. The ingratitude of the nine may surprise us, but it did not surprise him, for he knew about it in advance. And he still gave. How awesome this is! How incredible. We see in both readings the marvelous goodness of God.

The second reading expressed God's gratuity in a different way: "If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful", St. Paul said. We never deserve what the Lord gives, but precisely because of that, our faithful gratitude is due. Woe to us if we do not thank God in the face of such great and free gifts! And St. Paul says in another place, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you".¹ Our life is a gift; our membership in his Church is a gift; the sacraments are gifts; we have so many blessings besides!

But we also have trials and pain. We have prayers that were not answered as we desired; requests for healing or other special graces that we did not receive. "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God", St. Paul says; yes, always – not just when we get what we want. Thanking God for what we do not like – for what we might consider bad – is a deep expression of faith. It's a recognition of his almighty power and wisdom, that he sees a bigger picture than we see and that he can bring good out of it yet.

Indeed, as we kneel before the altar today, we should ask Jesus for the grace not only to be more consistently and faithfully thankful, but to be better at expressing our gratitude even when things do not go our way. We thereby ask him to increase our faith, for we see his great goodness and we have heard his incredible promises. His wisdom and knowledge so greatly surpass ours; we always owe him humble thanks. The nine who were ungrateful increased our Lord's sadness; may we – by our thanksgiving – console him.

¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:18.