

WAS NO ONE FOUND TO RETURN AND GIVE PRAISE TO GOD EXCEPT THIS FOREIGNER -- Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Lk 17.11-19

On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."

And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan

Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."

This Sunday's Gospel, Luke's Gospel chapter 17, 11-19, seems to be simple, an easy reading. Actually it is one of the most complex and most complicated passages of Luke's Gospel.

Let's see if we can understand the contradictions and the meaning that the evangelist wants to give us in this passage. Luke writes: "*On the way to Jerusalem...*" The evangelist uses the word *Jerusalem* meaning the holy city. Jesus goes for the final confrontation with the Holy See of that time, the most sacred institution that existed in the world, where there was the Lord's temple.

So Jesus goes to confront this institution. The itinerary presented by the evangelist is somewhat strange. Luke writes that Jesus "*.. he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee.*" He should have written that He passed through Galilee then Samaria. If we have the idea more or less of what Palestine was at the time of Jesus, at the north there is Galilee, in the middle Samaria, the region habituated by heretics, people considered the most repulsive and the farthest from God, and finally to the south there was Judea with Jerusalem.

Therefore the evangelist should have written that Jesus passed through Galilee and then Samaria. Why did he say that He passed through Samaria and then Galilee? Because he wanted to center the reader's attention on what happened in the land of Israel, in Galilee.

“And as he entered a village,...” Now here the evangelist gives us a precious indication that helps the interpreter, the commentator. When the word “village” appears in the Gospels, it means a place always hostile, the misunderstanding and the rejection of Jesus’ message. Why is this? Because the village is a place anchored in tradition, a place subjected by the city.

But while in the city trends come and go, they change, in the villages tradition is deep rooted. Therefore the village is where tradition exists “why change if it has always been like this” So every time we find written in the Gospels “village”, it means a place where tradition is all and where there is the misunderstanding or the rejection of Jesus’ message.

And here is a surprise, *“And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers.”* Impossible! Lepers were not allowed in the village. Lepers, because of infection, must stay out of the village. How come the evangelist here says the lepers are in the village? The evangelist, beyond historical narrative, wants to give us a precious indication: all those who live within the tradition, all those who are live subjected to the traditional religion, they are like the lepers, impure.

They have no possible contact with God. These are real lepers being in the village. And here the behavior of these lepers is rather strange. *“... who stood at a distance..”* in one instant the evangelist had said that “they came to meet them” and in another “that they stood at a distance.”

On one hand they violate the law that the leper is forbidden to approach anyone, but on the other hand they observe the law. Through the image of these lepers the evangelist wants us to see how difficult is the work of the disciples, they are fascinated with Jesus’ words, of the freedom that this message brings, but are still slaves of the religious tradition that they have in their blood.

“...lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus,,...” and the tradition says “Master”, but actually it is “the boss”, so in this Gospel, only the disciples turn to Jesus and in particular Peter, to call Jesus “Master”. It is a literary artistry with which the evangelist wants to indicate that in the figure of these lepers the disciples are represented. And he continues: *“... have mercy on us.”* So, on one hand they are subject to a religion that forbids them the full communion with God, and on the other hand they would like to be free, but they do not have the strength, they ask Jesus for help.

“When he saw them he said to them,...” Jesus does not heal or cure them, but tells them: *“Go and show yourselves to the priests.”* Jesus invites them to leave the village, the priests are in Jerusalem, therefore Jesus invites them to abandon the place of tradition, of the religious tradition, this the authentic leprosy that forbids mankind’s relationship with God. It has always been like this, why change?

Actually, *“..as they went they were cleansed.”* Jesus does not do anything for the lepers, He invites them to leave the village. When they leave the village, even before arriving to the priests to ensure the healing, here they find themselves purified. And yet another surprise. *Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed,”* therefore Jesus heals, cleanses all ten, *“.... turned*

back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' To fall on ones' face before someone was a sign of a follower– to thank Him. It was a Samaritan.

Here the evangelist's surprise . They are all ten, healed they are purified, but only one stops the give thanks. And who is it? The person that is the farthest from God , the person excluded from God, the person for whom there is not salvation. The person whose only name, Samaritan, was something repulsive. Calling someone a Samaritan was the worst insult possible, when they want to offend Jesus they called Him a Samaritan.

So, the person farthest from God, the person that is excluded from God, then it is he who in fact perceives God's actions in his life. And Jesus observes: *"Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God....."* Giving praise to God was an exclusive privilege of the Israeli population, that of the Samaritan was excluded...." *except this foreigner?"* in other words the person farthest from God.

And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." With this passage the evangelist tells us what faith is. What is faith? Many think that faith is a gift from God, but it's not. If faith was a gift from God many would have the right if they felt they didn't have it , to say " God has not given it to me. Lucky you that have lots of faith!"

Others have faith, but when something difficult happens in life, which can happen, they say " I had faith, but I have lost it". No!. Faith does not come from God, there is faith or there is not. One does not have faith for a while and then lose it. Faith is not a gift from God to mankind, but the reply of mankind to the gift of love that God has for all humanity.

But, strangely , in this Gospel, those that are praised for their faith are the people thought to be the farthest from God. It almost seems that those that live inside the religious system have like a filter that prevents them to see God's actions and to have faith. In fact Jesus in this Gospel praises the faith of the pagan centurion, praises the faith of the prostitute, the reservoir of impurities, the person farthest from God.

The same Jesus praises the faith of a hemorrhaging woman, a person that was considered impure like a leper; Jesus praises the faith of the blind man, that was considered cursed by God. While, on the contrary, Jesus reproaches His disciples, people of little faith. The religion, the whole collection of practices, of beliefs that are taught to mankind, is a filter that prevents humanity from the noticing the love that God desires to communicate to each person, no one excluded.

There is no one in the world that can think themselves excluded from Gods love. It is the religion – this is the true leper – that divides between the pure and the impure, between the worthy or not, between the deserving or not , but not God. God's love is towards every creature. Welcome it and respond, this is faith.