

**WAS NO ONE FOUND TO RETURN AND GIVE PRAISE TO GOD EXCEPT THIS FOREIGNER? – Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM**

**Luke 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.*

Luke's gospel chapter 17,11-19 presents a passage that is exclusive to this evangelist. To interpret it we are helped by the interpretation, figures, and indications that the author, the evangelist himself places in the text for a right understanding. Let's read this passage

*"On the way to Jerusalem..."* Jerusalem, in the Greek language, is written in two ways. One is Ierusalem, which is the transliteration of the Hebrew sacred name Yerushalayim, which indicates the holy city, the institution. The other is the geographical name, Jerozolima. Here is the first name, Ierusalem, which indicates that Jesus is going towards what is the sacred institution, the most important point of religion for his people. And it will be right there where he will find death. *"...he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee."* This itinerary is strange; for the understanding of the text it must be kept in mind that, while the Galilee is the region to the north of Palestine, in the centre there is Samaria, and then to the south Judea with the capital Jerusalem. So the evangelist should have written "crossed the Galilee", then to the north, "Samaria to go to Jerusalem". Why does the evangelist put this strange itinerary? *"...passing along between Samaria and Galilee."* Because he wants to focus attention on Galilee, that is, on the territory of Israel. That is where this happens. *"...as he entered a village..."* This is another of the indications that the evangelist (all the evangelists in effect) poses for understanding the text. The village, anonymous, in the Gospels always has the meaning of misunderstanding or even opposition and hostility to Jesus and the novelty he brings. . Why this? Because the village - as we know - is the place where fashions, novelties always arrive late, but then take root and when they take root they become a tradition that is difficult to eradicate.

So the village in the gospel means the place of "it has always been done this way" and where the novelties are viewed with suspicion. This village is anonymous so it indicates this type of environment. *"... he was met by ten lepers..."* This is impossible. It is impossible because the lepers, from the moment in which their existence was known, were expelled from the village, they had to live outside the village, in a secluded place. Why does the evangelist say that "upon entering a village, ten lepers met him"? The lepers cannot live in a village. Luke is telling us that leprosy, this impurity, is due precisely to the fact that they live in this village. Whoever dwells in tradition,

who rejects the novelties that God proposes, no longer has any communication with the Lord. Therefore this leprosy, this impurity is due to the fact that they live in this village.

*"..who stood at a distance..."* they live in the village, in the place of tradition, and observe the law. The book of Leviticus in chapter 13, 45-46, gives precise indications on how the leper should behave. *"...and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master,..."* literally calling him "master" like his disciples *"..have mercy on us."* So on the one hand they live in tradition and on the other they see in Jesus that there can be the hope of salvation

Jesus does not cure them. *"When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests."* Why? At that time, any skin disease went under the name leprosy, And there are some diseases that can naturally be cured. But, to be readmitted to the village, it was necessary to go to the priest in Jerusalem to certify the disappearance of this infection, of this disease.

Then a sort of certificate was obtained to be readmitted to the village. Then Jesus says "Go and present yourselves to the priests". *"And as they went they were cleansed."* It is by leaving the village that they become purified. Jesus does not heal, leaving the village the lepers recover. So it is proof that this impurity was due to their permanence in this traditional environment.

*"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,..."* a typical gesture of the disciples *"..giving him thanks."* From the verb "to thank" comes the Eucharist which means "thanksgiving". And here is the novelty, the surprise of the evangelist, *"... he was a Samaritan."*

It is interesting that, while the disease joins these Jews, Galilean and Samaritan lepers, then later, once they have recovered, the only one who shows a feeling of gratitude is not one belonging to the people of Israel, but was a Samaritan. that was considered to be farther away, a sinner, impure from birth, excluded however from any relationship with God.

It is a characteristic of this evangelist to see that the models of faith in this gospel are always foreigners or always the most distant from God. Jesus had already praised the centurion's faith, the faith of the prostitute, the haemorrhage and that of the blind. The more people are considered distant from God, the more in them there is this feeling of gratitude; they immediately perceive the signs of God in their lives

*Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God..."* to give glory to God was the privilege of Israel. Well this privilege that was exclusive to Israel, is now for all humanity, including the Samaritans.

*"..except this foreigner?"* It is the only time that the word foreigner appears in the Gospel, and a foreigner indicated the enemy, the rejected, in a positive manner. *"And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."*

Jesus, according to Luke, continues this teaching on what faith is. Faith is not a gift that God gives to some, but the response of men to the gift of love that God gives to all.

Those who perceive this love and respond, this is called faith. Here we have seen, Jesus himself says it, all ten have been healed, but only one has returned, he has responded to this healing. And this is faith. Therefore faith is not a gift that God makes to some and not to others, but the response of men to the gift of love that God makes. And what is faith? Faith is knowing how to respond positively to those events that life brings us together.

