

**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."***

Luke's gospel, chapter 17, 11-19, presents an exclusive passage of this evangelist. To interpret it we will have help from some keys in the reading, of some figures, of some indications that the author, the evangelist himself puts in the text for a correct understanding. So, let's read this passage.

*"On the way to Jerusalem..."* Jerusalem, in the Greek language is written in two ways. One is "Ierusalem", that is the transliteration of the Jewish sacred name "Yershlayam", indicating the holy city, the institution. The other is the geographical name, "Jerzolima." Here it is the first name, "Ierusalem", that indicates that Jesus was going towards that sacred institution, the most important point of the religion for his people. And it will be there, where he will find his death.

*"...he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee."* This itinerary is strange; to understand the text, one must bear in mind that, whilst Galilee is the northern region of Palestine, in the middle there is the Samaria, and then in the south Judea with Jerusalem as capital. Therefore the evangelist should have written "passing through Galilee", in the north, then "the Samaria to go towards Jerusalem" Why does the evangelists put in this strange itinerary? *".. passing along between Samaria and Galilee."* Because

he wants to centre the attention on Galilee, that is the Israeli territory. It is there that this fact took place.

*“And as he entered a village,”* This is another indication that the evangelist ( as all the evangelists do in fact) poses for the understanding of the text. The village, anonymous, in the gospel always means misunderstanding or even hostility and opposition to Jesus and the news that he brings. Why this? Because the village – is known – as the place where novelties arrive much later, but then they flourish and take root and when they become a tradition it is difficult to uproot.

So, the village in the gospel means a place of “ it has always been like this” and where the novelty is seen with suspicion. This village is anonymous therefore 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 certified, they were expelled from the village, they had to live outside the village, in an isolated place. How come the evangelist says that *“..as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers,”* The lepers cannot live in the village. Luke is telling us that leprosy, this impurity, is due precisely to the fact that it dwells in this village.

Who lives in the tradition, who refuses the novelty that God proposes, no longer has any communication with the Lord, so to be impure means no longer to have any communication. 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 observance of the law. The book of Leviticus 13,45-46 gives exact indications on how the leper must behave. *“..lifted up their voices, saying, “Jesus, Master, “* They literally call him “Teacher”, just like his disciples, *“..have mercy on us.”* So on the one hand they live in the tradition and on the other they see in Jesus that there can be hope of salvation.

Jesus does not heal them. *“When he saw them he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.”* Why? At that time, under the name of leper, it was someone with a skin complaint And there are some illnesses, that, naturally can be cured. But, to remain in the village, it was necessary to go to the priest at Jerusalem that certified the healing of this infection, of this illness.

So, a kind of certificate was obtained to be allowed to stay in the village. For this Jesus says, *“Go and show yourselves to the priests,” “And as they went they were cleansed.”* On leaving the village they were cleansed. Jesus did not heal, leaving the village the lepers were cured. Therefore it is the proof that this impurity was because of their permanence in that environment of tradition.

*“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.. “* the typical behaviour of the disciples.. *“.. giving him thanks.”* From the verb “to thank” comes the Eucharist that means “to give thanks”. And here is the novelty, the surprise of the evangelist, *“.. he was a Samaritan.”*

It is interesting that, while the illness is common to these Jews, Galileans and Samaritans lepers, that after, once cured, the only one that shows a feeling of gratitude and thanks is not one belonging to the

people of Israel, but one that was considered to be the furthest from God, sinful, impure from birth, excluded from any relationship with God. Was a Samaritan.

It is a characteristic of the evangelist to see that the models of faith in this gospel are always foreigners or people distant from God. Jesus had already praised the faith of the centurion, the faith of the prostitute, the woman with a discharge of blood and that of the blind man. The more the people are distant from God, the greater their feeling of gratitude; immediately they 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 praise God was the privilege of Israel. Well this privilege that was exclusive to Israel, now is for all humanity, including the Samaritans.

*“..except this foreigner?”* It is the only time that the word foreigner appears in the gospel, and foreigner meant enemy, the rejected, in a positive way. *“And he said to him, “Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.”* Jesus, according to Luke, continues this teaching of what faith is, faith is not a gift that God gives to all, but the reply of mankind to the gift of love that God gives to all.

Those who perceive this love and answer it, this is called faith. Here we have seen, Jesus says himself, all ten were healed, but only one returned, to respond to this healing. And this is faith. Therefore faith is not a gift that God gives to some and to others less, but the response of men to God's gift of love. And what is faith? Faith is knowing how to respond positively to those events that we encounter through our lives.