

January 22, 2012

Third Sunday After Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Luke, the only Evangelist to tell us of the ten lepers cleansed by Jesus, tells the story succinctly, but with enough details to make it unforgettable.

Jesus is apparently passing through the border territory shared by Galilee and Samaria. Consequently, those around him are a somewhat mixed crowd, predominantly Galileans but with some Samaritans in the group. Jesus comes to a village.

Standing afar off, a handful of lepers shout out to him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" These lepers are standing afar off, because they are not permitted to enter into the village itself. They remain just outside the city limits. They can approach no closer, but their voices reach the ears of Jesus. They plead with him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Jesus could walk over and touch them, as he did to the other leper, twelve chapters earlier (Luke 5:12-16). Instead, Jesus instructs these lepers, "Go, show yourselves to the priests."

Now, this is curious. The lepers ask for mercy, and Jesus responds by instructing them to *do* something. He simply gives a command; he does not heal them right away. He does not even promise to heal them. He just says, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." The lepers ask for mercy; he gives them a *podvig*, an obedience, a duty, a task they are to perform. That is Jesus' last word to this group.

The burden of this command, however, is not bare obedience, or obedience for the purpose of raw submission. The command is, rather, a summons to personal trust. When Jesus tells the lepers, "Go, show yourselves to the priests," the order really means, "Show me that you trust me! Obey me as your Lord because you trust me as your Savior."

Why show themselves to the priests? Unless the reader is familiar with the Old Testament, this gesture is probably not self-evident. In fact, however, Jesus gave the same command to the leper cured in Luke's fifth chapter. This referral to the priest meets the requirements of the Levitical code about leprosy. Since this disease renders a person ritually impure with respect to Israel's common worship, the actual healing of a leper must be certified by a priest (Leviticus 14).

Along the way, says Luke, these lepers are all cleansed. The story touches a

constant pattern in the Gospel stories of Jesus. He heals people---he restores people---by telling them to *do* something. The purpose of this is invariably to test their trust in him. He says to a crippled man, "Rise up and walk!" He tells a blind man, "Go, wash your eyes in the Pool of Siloam!" He instructs the waiters at Cana, "Fill the pots with water!" He commands the citizens of Bethany, "Roll away the stone from the door of the tomb!" And now he tells the ten lepers, "Go, show yourselves to the priests!"

Then comes the irony: One of these cleansed lepers, seeing what has happened to him, gains a new insight, and this insight forms a large part of the story: Instead of going to one of the local priests (evidently at his Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim), this man returns to Jesus.

When this cleansed leper does return, what does he do? Luke tells us, "And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at [Jesus'] feet, giving him thanks."

There is a massive paradox here. At first it appears that this leper has disobeyed the command of Jesus. It is the major point of the story, however, that Jesus does not see it that way. Far from reprimanding the man for not doing exactly what he was told, Jesus commends him: "Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well."

In the singling out of this leper, Luke perceives that the history of salvation has been dramatically changed by the appearance of Jesus. The Old Testament priesthood is truly a thing of the past. The prescriptions of the Torah no longer set the standard. The new standard is Jesus himself. This cleansed servant of God, a sort of double outcast---outcast as a Samaritan and outcast as a leper--lays hold on the new direction of God's ways with men.

This Samaritan, in the view of Luke, is given the grace to recognize the new priest, the *true* priest. So he returns to Jesus, "inasmuch as he is the Mediator of a better covenant, which has been established on better promises" (Hebrews 8:6).

©2012 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor

phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php