

Trinity 14 (2024)

Most of you are familiar with Father Brown.

I am thinking of the television series, though the character goes back much further to a series of short stories by G. K. Chesterton.

If you have ever watched any of these shows, you know they are full of surprises. As in most murder mysteries, the one ‘who done it’ is often the person you least expect.

Two or three days ago I watched an episode where the villain turned out to be an Anglican military chaplain, actually a man impersonating one.

It was quite a surprise when Father Brown untwined the mystery . . . figured out it was this man who was attempting to steal a valuable cross containing relics.

Additional surprises followed as the show moved along. You might say it was a “story of surprises.”

The same might be said about this morning’s Gospel. It too is a “story of surprises.”

First, we find in it **astonishing faith**, this faith belonging to the ten lepers.

All ten believed Jesus was the real deal when many if not most of the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem remained unbelieving and were even at that moment plotting to kill Him

Without exception they came seeking mercy

They believed verily He could do for them what He had done for others, give them back their life.

We see further evidence of their faith in their response to Jesus’ command “to go show

yourselves to the priests.” They went without questioning or delay.

Just so you will know, the priests were the public health officers in those days. It was they who could lift a leper’s quarantine and say he was free to reenter society.

I might add here that Jesus’ method of healing these men is also a surprise. You would have thought He would have healed them and then sent them to the priests, but rather He told them to go while they were still dripping with leprosy.

Their healing took place at some point along the way.

Again, their response was remarkable. They went without questioning. In so doing, they exhibited remarkable, astonishing faith.

They stand as models to us. Then as now, faith is the golden key that opens the casket to God's blessings.

The writer of Hebrews says, **“Without faith it is impossible to please God”** (11:6).

But what is faith?

Many over the years have found the insights in Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's book *The Power of Positive Thinking* helpful, even life changing.

Changing our mental attitude changes everything. **“A mind is its own place, can make a heaven out of hell, a hell out of heaven,”** to quote a line from Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Nevertheless, Christian faith goes beyond positive thinking.

Christian faith is not faith in faith . . . whistling and taking on an air of confidence when you are afraid or facing a challenge.

Rather it is focused on an object. That object is the living God.

In the case of the lepers, they brought their need to Jesus who, to quote the familiar Christmas carol, is **“Word of the Father. Now in flesh appearing.”**

They saw in Jesus someone more than a prophet, teacher or faith healer. To be in His presence was to be in the presence of the Almighty. He could do what only God could do.

We need to follow their lead. What’s on your mind and heart this morning? Bring it to Jesus. Know He cares and can help.

More than that, be specific. Don’t pray in generalities.

These ten men did not cry out, “**Lord, bless all the sick people of the world.**” Rather they were very specific in their request: “**Master, have mercy on us.**”

There is something else we learn from them as well. **Real faith has feet.**

What I mean is that faith is more than a thought or feeling. It involves action. For the lepers, it was to go show themselves to the priests.

The same was true in the life of the patriarch Abraham in the Old Testament. When God called him to leave the Ur of the Chaldees and to go into a land God intended to give him, a land he had never seen, he did not just fold his hands and say, “Lord, I believe.”

Rather, He put on his sandals. He pulled up his tent pegs, got his family together and began the journey.

We must follow his lead. Real faith has feet. This is the faith that pleases God and brings untold blessings.

If, for example, you find yourself praying for a family that has no winter fuel, whose woodpile is empty.

You might find yourself praying, “God, supply this family’s need.”

That’s good as far as it goes. You should bring that need to God. But even as you are praying, you may well find God taping you on the shoulder saying, **“You have downed tree and a chainsaw. Get it out and get busy.”**

That is faith with feet, and again that is the faith that pleases God and brings untold blessings.

The church in which you are sitting this morning is here because of such faith. Give God

the glory, but also thank Him for the people who responded to His call in the past and did what He called them to do. Resolve to follow their lead.

So, the first surprise we find in today's Gospel is the astonishing faith of the ten lepers.

But we are not finished. The surprise that follows is that only one of the ten returns to say thank you.

Astonishing faith is followed by extraordinary ingratitude. At the very least, we can say, their mammas didn't teach them very well.

More than that – and this is an additional surprise -- the one that did come back was a Samaritan, an outcast, one with whom the Jews under normal circumstances had no dealings.

I guess if we are honest, we would have to say that we have played both parts.

There are times when we have behaved as the one. Overwhelmed by some extraordinary blessing -- perhaps a financial windfall when our coffers were empty, perhaps following a good report on a medical examination, perhaps the near avoidance of an accident – we found ourselves overwhelmed with thanksgiving. We found ourselves in the company of the grateful Samaritan.

Yet, there have been other times when we have found ourselves in the opposite camp, the camp of the nine who failed to return and give thanks.

There is an old spiritual discipline of listing one's blessings, naming them one by one before God and giving thanks. It's a healthy discipline. What not try it?

No doubt there will be some common items on our lists, things like food, family, friends, shelter, faith and freedom.

And since Monday is Labor Day, we should certainly add meaningful work.

Labor can be burdensome, but it also can be exhilarating. It gives us purpose, puts food on the table and contributes to the good of society.

Jesus was no stranger to work. In the carpenter shop of Nazareth, He worked alongside Joseph . . . first watching and then doing . . . going from an apprentice to a master.

And, as He got older, He took on an even higher vocation.

Remember how at age 12 He told His mother: **“I must be about my Father’s business or work.”** “Father,” here, being His Father in Heaven.

Work is good so long as it is honorable. It should be on our list of things for which we give thanks. After all, not everyone has this blessing. Some are disabled and cannot work; others don't have the skills needed to get meaningful employment; still others have been made redundant because of a weak economy or changes in the world marketplace. ///

Going back to where we started, today's Gospel is a story of surprises. We have looked at some of these.

As we reflect on this story, may we be reminded of the importance of faith, in particular faith with feet.

At the same time, let it prompt us to cultivate the grace of gratitude. Gratitude brings additional blessings.

Remember how today's Gospel ends. The returning Samaritan gets a double blessing. Jesus says to him, **“Arise, your faith has made you whole or has saved you.”**

He gets more than physical healing that day. He gets a new purpose and destiny. May the same be true in your life and my life.

As I close, let me say: The Gospel of Jesus Christ is practical. Yes, no doubt, it will ‘get us all to heaven’, but it also brings blessings in the present. Hope for tomorrow; help for today.

Thanks be to God for both!