

To Whom Do You Look?

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

Anciently, any sort of incurable skin disease symbolized that death was triumphing in a person and so made that person unfit to come close to the God of Life, the One Lord of Israel. Such a one was cut off from community with those who belong to the One Living God. Standing at a significant distance, then ten such people called out to Jesus. One of them was a Samaritan—probably despised even by the others, who were Jews. The Samaritan was pushed away from God in two ways, and yet he hoped in God and recognized God’s presence in Jesus as much as any of his fellow lepers.

To whom do you turn when you feel or really are isolated, even rejected? We all felt that sometime during our growing up years. Did it occur to us to turn to God? Did it occur to us that God might not have rejected us or pushed us away just because our peers had? Hope and acceptance are ordinarily inseparable, at least in a young person’s mind. Now put that together with the fact that Jesus accepted these ten and healed them of the physical side of their isolation. But nine didn’t even think of thanking him—only the one who knew rejection from almost every side saw the real need to draw near to the one who had reached out with love and healing. That’s what gratitude is about.

The very successful General Naaman, head of the Syrian army, had no one to whom he could turn. A little girl, enslaved by Naaman, told him to turn to Elisha, the prophet of a God Naaman had never worshipped or acknowledged, and to ask him for healing. Even in his unbelief God healed him. To have God’s help you just have to turn from human resources and ask. God gives freely, as Elisha showed by refusing all payment. Secretly Elisha’s servant went and asked payment; he got money but also Naaman’s leprosy.

What does God ask? Only that our gratitude cause us to point to the Lord as everyone’s hope for healing and life. To whom does God send us, to those who are outcast and marginalized and have no one to turn to. How does one recognize such people? By their being shut in upon themselves, not knowing how to reach out for help, or to whom they should turn. What God wants now is to give us a reason to be grateful so we can show others where healing and new life are found. So we begin by turning to God, once we realize that the life we seek isn’t to be found anywhere else. Then we need only share the story of how God healed us and gave us new hope and joy. That is our vocation and there are millions of ways to live it out. Grateful love is the beginning of all of them and their heart.

The Gifts Given Us in Faith

A reflection taken from a Gospel Commentary by Fr. Martin Luther

”On the way to Jerusalem Jesus travelled along the border between Galilee and Samaria Israel, and about to enter a village ten lepers came to him and standing some way off called to him: Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!” In the lepers the Gospel teaches us faith in Christ; in Christ it teaches us love. Faith and love constitute the character of a Christian.

Faith receives; love gives. Faith brings us to God and love brings us to our fellows. Through faith we permit God to do good for us and through love we do good for our fellows. Whoever believes has everything from God. Henceforth one needs nothing more. All one lives and does is for the good and benefit of the neighbor. Through love we do for our neighbor as God did for us through faith; we reap good from above through faith, and give good below through love.

In contrast, there are people who work only to serve themselves. I call them “work-righteous”; they heap up merits and good works but only to get from God what they want. They do good but without faith. So we need to reflect on faith and love and how they appear in the lepers and Christ.

In the first place, it is characteristic of faith to trust in God’s grace. This gives us a bright hope and a refuge in God. Doubting nothing, such faith thinks God will not forsake one. Where there is no hope and no confidence there is no true faith, and there is also no true prayer, nor any seeking after God. Where faith exists it makes one bold and even anxious to freely bring one’s troubles to God and earnestly pray for help. The lepers were taught by faith how to pray fruitfully. They believed Jesus would be gracious for they had heard good things of him and trusted this and him.

Christ himself teaches us to love. Love does to neighbors as Christ has done to us. In John’s Gospel Jesus says, *“I have given you an example that you too should do as I have done to you”*, and adds, *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you.”* What does this mean? It means that through Christ, in faith, we now have all we need. Christ is now our own and so we are rich and satisfied; for all Christ does is not for his sake but for ours. Christ only thinks how to be useful and helpful to us and accomplish whatever we need and should have. By his example we do for each other as he has done for us; we only consider how to be useful to our neighbor. As your faith has enough in Christ’s love and grace, so your love will also give enough to others. Behold, this is a Christian life. We do not need much teaching or many books. All is contained in faith and love.

The Struggle to Put Love First

A reflection ending a retreat made by St. Pope John XXIII

My retreat master suggested to me that I reflect on the Gospel episode of the miraculous catch of fish, ending in the dialogue between Jesus and Peter, ending with the command “Feed my lambs”! There is great authority in these words, investing the first pope with his task as universal shepherd. It is to be an answer to the thrice repeated assurance of love for Jesus who has deigned to ask for it with gentle insistence. It is love, then, that matters. Jesus asks Peter for it and Peter assures Jesus of it.

Peter’s successor knows that in in his person and in all that he does there is the grace and the law of love. It sustains, inspires and adorns everything. In the eyes of the whole world it is this mutual love between Jesus and Peter that is the foundation of the Holy Church, a foundation which is at the same time visible and invisible—Jesus being invisible to the eyes of the flesh and the Pope being visible to the whole world. When I ponder this mystery of intimate love I think what an honor and a joy it is for me, but at the same time what a reason for shame for my own littleness and worthlessness.

My life must be filled with the love of Jesus and with a great outpouring of goodness and sacrifice for individual souls and the whole world. Jesus foretold this to Peter: “*When you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go*”. I have not yet entered upon helpless old age; but having completed eighty years I am on the threshold. O Jesus, I am ready to stretch out my hands, now weak and trembling, and allow others to dress and support me along the way. After so many graces, showered upon me during my long life, there is nothing now that I can refuse. You have shown me the way, O Jesus, I will follow you wherever you go, to sacrifice, to mortification, to death.

Oh what joy I feel in concluding the last notes of my retreat with the hymn which Holy Church dedicates to the most holy and august Trinity: “O holy Trinity, your suppliant servants spare. Grant to us to rise to heaven for Joseph’s sake and prayer. And so our grateful hearts to you shall every raise exulting canticles of praise. Amen”

Healing the Leprosy of Sin

A reflection from a Gospel commentary by Fr. Bruno of Segni

On his way to Jerusalem to offer his life for the salvation of all, Jesus was encountered by ten lepers. What do the lepers stand for? They stand for all sinners! When Christ the Lord came not everyone was a leper in body, but all were leprous in their soul. It is much worse to have a leprous soul than a leprous body.

Standing a long way off, the ten called out: Jesus, Master, have pity on us! They are represented as standing a long way off because no one in their condition dared to come close to God or into God's presence. We stand a long way off if we continue to sin. So we too must cry out: Jesus, Master, have pity on me. That cry, moreover, must come from the heart. The cry of the heart is much louder than that of the mouth. It pierces the heavens and rises up to the very throne of God.

When Jesus saw the lepers he told them to go and show themselves to a priest. God has only to look at us to be filled with compassion. Jesus pitied those lepers as soon as he saw them. He sent them to a priest but not so the priest would cleanse them. He was only to pronounce them clean. As they obeyed Jesus they were cleansed.

Let all sinners listen well to this. Try to understand that it is easy for the Lord to forgive sins. Sinners are often forgiven before they come to a priest. In fact, repentance and healing occur simultaneously. At the very moment of conversion a person passes from death to life. But we have to struggle to understand what conversion then requires.

We must heed the Lord's words: "Return with all your heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning and don't tear your clothing but break open your heart". To be really converted one must be so inwardly. God will not spurn a humbled and contrite heart. One of the lepers, when he saw he was cured, went back praising God. He was a Samaritan and he stands for all those who, after being cleansed by the waters of baptism or healed by the sacrament of penance, renounce the devil and take Christ as their model. They follow him with praise, adoration and thanksgiving.

Jesus said to this person: Stand up and go your way; your faith has saved you. Great is the power of faith! Without it, as St. Paul says, it is impossible to please God. Faith saves. Faith justifies. Faith heals both body and soul. St. Paul gives us the example of Abraham. He believed God's promise, and so was righteous before God. What has God promised you? What have you asked for? If God asked you this question could you reply: "I want only you, Lord."?

Accepting God's Chastisements

A reflection from a sermon by St. Oger, disciple of St. Bernard

We are told by Scripture that it is those God loves that God chastises. This is explained in terms of the belief that children have to be punished and that our being punished is a sign that God accepts us as children. This sort of punishment is the lot of all those destined to rejoice in eternity. If we would draw near to God we mustn't complain of what we have to suffer; we must bear this with patience and love if we want a heavenly inheritance.

Brethren, discipline is never pleasant but it bears the fruit of goodness and so of peace. The Lord's discipline weakens sensuality and strengthens spiritual virtue. The flesh loses nothing it can't spare while the spirit gains what it lacked. Thanks to the Lord's discipline virtues grow, vices are restrained, earthly attractions are devalued and heavenly joys loved the more.

Supposing our health is seriously impaired, or powerful temptations assail us, or suppose we suffer the loss of worldly goods—we who hope for an eternal reward should draw strength from such sufferings. We know that the fiercer the battle the more glorious will be the victory. We give proof of a powerful longing for God if our way to God is not always smooth and pleasant, but sometimes harsh and rugged. We can't any longer come to eternal joys except through temporal loss. We should therefore regard all that goes against our natural desires as being of great advantage because of our hope for everlasting bliss.

God's severity will by no means allow our sins to go unpunished, but God expresses anger only in the judgments passed on us here and now and for our correction. Thus he will not have to condemn along with the wicked at the last judgment. Working within us like a surgeon God condemns and cuts away whatever in us is infected by sin. God cleanses us of corruption with the knife of affliction. This is what the Truth himself says: Every branch of mine that bears fruit God, the Heavenly Father, will prune so that it can bear even more fruit.

When people undergo temptation and see their constancy in virtue getting weak, they become alarmed for fear of losing everything. But with God's help they seize the sword of prayer and shed tears of sorrow and thus weaken the temptation and gloriously triumph. They don't do this by themselves but by the grace of Christ working in and through them. In the end, you rise up strong and capable of bearing very abundant fruit. Trust and have faith in God.

The Anxiety of Our Prophet Office

A reflection from an article by Fr. Karl Rahner

God's Spirit bestows many spontaneous charisms which are in nature prophetic. They don't cease to be prophetic either because these people remain in the Church or because they evoke opposition within the Church. This was true in Israel, as it is today. We answer God's call to prophesy often at the cost of grave conflicts. If you pause to reflect you realize that the Church itself, with its internal order, is a fulfillment of prophecies made by Jesus.

The key point is that prophesy primarily has to do with hopes, those that are true and those that are false. The charismatic office of prophet in the Church helps to make the message of hope by Jesus new and relevant and actual for each age. It doesn't matter whether the representatives of this prophecy are authors of religious renewal, or are critics of the Church and society of their day, or are the discoverers of new tasks for the Church and the faithful. It doesn't matter whether they are called prophets or given other names. They mostly belong to the company of saints.

It may be that such people don't merely reaffirm general principles and apply them to new cases, but display a message that is new and creative and gives an incalculable hope. It may be that they become keys to an historic turning point. This doesn't matter if they are effective in calling the Church to this new hope. We may say that the Church has had a "major" or "minor" prophet depending on whether there is given through them some new promise of hope whose pursuit can lead many closer to God.

It may even happen in the Church, without detriment to the ultimate promises made to it by Christ, that true prophecy or prophets are repressed by the holders of offices, or it can happen they are met with indifference among the faithful. Further, there may be false prophets in the Church, even among those who think that going on without change will bring all to God's Kingdom. Indeed, the message of a prophet may be an inextricable mixture of true and false.

The defense of genuine prophecy against a conservative establishment, or the unmasking of false hopes and false prophecy within the Church, can itself be a prophetic mission. God is a God of surprises. He constantly tears down that he may rebuild better than his human instruments have done. Faith accepts this challenge and even rejoices when accepting a new hope means letting go of one that has long been cherished. Trust in God and in the Spirit; they never abandon their Church or those who hope in them. Do not be afraid of your call to be a prophet and to call those around you to richer and deeper trust in God's Providence. That is part of the prophetic call.

Thy Kingdom Come

A reflection from The Way of Perfection by St. Teresa of Avila

Is there anyone who wants to ask a highly placed person for a favor and doesn't begin by reflecting on how to address the person? Wouldn't you try to say something pleasing first and think carefully of the request you will make so as to explain the good that granting it will accomplish. This is especially the case if the request is an important one. Isn't this just the kind of requests that our good Jesus asks us to make in prayer? This point, I think, deserves serious consideration.

Couldn't you, O my Lord, have included everything in the one petition, "Give us, Father, whatever we need."? God knows all things. Further words seem needless. O Eternal Wisdom, this alone would have been enough between you and the Heavenly Father. That is how you spoke to the Father in the garden. You showed your will and your dread and submitted yourself to his will. But you know, O my God, that we are not so resigned to your will as was Jesus. We have a need to name each thing we pray for, so that we might decide whether it was what we wanted and if not then not ask for it. For being what we are, unless what we want is given us we may use our free will not to accept it as a divine gift, though it might be best for us. Unless we see the money in our hand we never think we are rich!

The good Jesus bids us say words which ask that God's Kingdom may come in us. Hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come in us. How great is the wisdom of our Master. It is well that we should all learn what we ask for when praying for this Kingdom. His majesty saw that unless he enabled us to do so by giving us his kingdom here on earth, our natural defects would make us unfit either to hallow or praise or magnify or glorify or extol the Holy Name of the Eternal Father. So the good Jesus placed two petitions close together.

Among the many joys of the Kingdom the principle one appears to me to consist in a disregard of all earthly things and know a peace and beatitude which rejoice and delight in the bliss of one's companions. One dwells in perfect peace and feels supreme satisfaction at seeing all those around one honor and praise God and bless God's name. One knows they never offend God. In heaven everyone loves God. This can't cease and that is because all know God as God is. If only we knew God in this way we would love him in that same way, even in this world. That is what we long and pray for when we pray "Thy Kingdom Come!" Pray it always with your heart on fire with love and longing.