

28th Sunday, yr. C, Xavier church, 2 Kings, 5, 14-17; Ps. 98, 1-4; 2 Tim. 2, 8-13; Lk. 17, 11-19

Fr. Ward Biemans SJ

Dear brothers and sisters, today's readings are about dealing with illness and about dying. In the first reading we heard that the Syrian Naaman is miraculously healed of his leprosy, by immersing himself seven times in the river Jordan, following the prophet Elisha's advice. At first, the army officer Naaman is angry when he hears this advice and replies: I could wash in the rivers of Damascus in Syria and be clean? But apparently, he needs to learn to trust in Elisha's words, who proclaims to have faith in the one God. Naaman follows his advice and gets healed. He then converts and asks Elisha to take back home some earth. He wants this so that he could honor the God of Israel on what he now considers to be holy ground.

In the Gospel another stranger is healed of leprosy, this time a Samaritan. He is the only one out of ten who have been healed, who comes back to thank Jesus. Apparently, it is not so easy to be thankful. The core of thankfulness to God is expressed in psalm 97: 'The Lord has worked wonders. So, shout to the Lord all the earth, ring out your joy.' It is good to pause more often to meditate all the marvelous things which God gives us. Many people complain about what is not good and they forget to look at all the good things which they receive from God. These are things we have received freely, such as love, good health, our intelligence or a good mood. These are all reasons to return to God something of the abundance we have received.

Dear brothers and sisters, when we are healed, this is of course a reason to be thankful. But we all know that healing is not always possible. When it comes to leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease, it still occurs in the tropics today. Doctors and nurses are busy providing medication to leprosy patients in often remote areas.

In the times of Elisha and Jesus, healings were considered miracles; in our time, it is more a matter of generosity from people like ourselves, enabling the right help to reach the right place.

When the healed Samaritan returns to Jesus to thank Him, Jesus says: 'Your faith has made you well.' Ultimately, Jesus is more concerned to save the Samaritan's soul, apart from his illness. Now we often tend to forget in our busy lives that our soul is immortal. We go from one thing to the next, we are constantly on the move, but often we do not think so much about the well-being of our immortal souls. Our soul, which means our life, needs to prepare for eternal life. Our dear Lord

Jesus calls us to be perfect, just as our heavenly Father is perfect. But we know that sometimes we fail.

The Church teaches us that when we sin in this life, some sins can be forgiven in this life, whereas other sins can be forgiven in the next world. This process of the purification of the soul is called Purgatory, for those who are chosen for salvation. From the saints we believe that they don't need Purgatory, but that after death they are taken up to heaven directly. 'Purgatory' is yet another concept which seems to be forgotten in our times, just as the concept of 'soul'. However, Holy Scripture speaks about the meaningfulness of prayer for the repose of the deceased, namely, in the second book Maccabees. There it says in chapter 12: 'Therefore he (that is Judas Maccabeus) made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin.' When there is no such a thing as a purification after death, then such a sacrifice as Judas Maccabeus made, would make no sense.

Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus' Gospel is a message of eternal life, as a continuation of this life. That is how St. Paul describes it in his letter to Timothy, which we heard in the second reading: 'If we have died with Him, we will also live with Him.' Jesus has suffered and died, before He returned in his Father's glory. He has shown himself to his disciples after his resurrection. When we are in trouble, Jesus remains faithful, whatever happens. Let us therefore be always focused on Him, for the sake of our souls and for our eternal bliss. Amen.