

Historic Commentary



(The 21st Sunday of Trinitytide - Year C)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 17:11-19: Selections from Church Fathers & John Calvin

*Compiled by the Rev. Eric Dirksen.

Cyril of Alexandria: Why did he not say, “I will, be cleansed,” as he did in the case of another leper, instead of commanding them to show themselves to the priests? It was because the law gave directions to this effect to those who were delivered from leprosy.² It commanded them to show themselves to the priests and to offer a sacrifice for their cleansing. He commanded them to go as being already healed so that they might bear witness to the priests, the rulers of the Jews and always envious of his glory. They testified that wonderfully and beyond their hope, they had been delivered from their misfortune by Christ’s willing that they should be healed. He did not heal them first but sent them to the priests, because the priests knew the marks of leprosy and of its healing.

Athanasius: Today, the Lord rebukes those who keep the Passover the way the Jews did, just as he rebuked certain lepers he had cleansed. You recall that he loved the one who was thankful, but he was angry with the ungrateful ones, because they did not acknowledge their Deliverer. They thought more highly of their cure from leprosy than of him who had healed them.... Actually, this one was given much more than the rest. Besides being healed of his leprosy, he was told by the Lord, “Stand up and go on your way. Your faith has saved you.” You see, those who give thanks and those who glorify have the same kind of feelings. They bless their helper for the benefits they have received. That is why Paul urged everybody to “glorify God with your body.” Isaiah also commanded, “Give glory to God.”

Cyril of Alexandria: Falling into a thankless forgetfulness, the nine lepers that were Jews did not return to give glory to God. By this, he shows that Israel was hard of heart and utterly unthankful. The stranger, a Samaritan, was of foreign race brought from Assyria. The phrase “in the middle of Samaria and Galilee” has meaning. “He returned with a loud voice to glorify God.” It shows that the Samaritans were grateful but that the Jews, even when they benefited, were ungrateful.

John Calvin: It is evident that all of them possessed some measure of faith, not only because they implore Christ’s assistance, but because they honor him with the title of Master That they made use of that expression sincerely, and not in hypocrisy, may be

inferred from their ready obedience; for, although they perceive that the filthy scab still remains in their flesh, yet as soon as they are commanded to show themselves to the priests, they do not refuse to obey. Add to this that, but for the influence of faith, they would never have set out to show themselves to the priests; for it would have been absurd to present themselves to the judges of leprosy, for the purpose of attesting that they had been cleansed, if the promise of Christ had been regarded by them as of no more value than a mere inspection of the disease. They bear a visible leprosy in their flesh; and yet, trusting to Christ's word alone, they have no scruple about declaring that they are clean. It cannot therefore be denied, that some seed of faith had been implanted in their hearts. Now though it is certain that they were not regenerated by the Spirit of adoption, yet there is no absurdity in supposing that they had some beginnings of piety. There is the greater reason to fear that sparks of faith, which make their appearance in us, may be extinguished; for, although lively faith, which has its roots deeply fixed by the Spirit of regeneration, never dies, yet we have seen formerly that many conceive a temporary faith, which immediately disappears. Above all, it is too common a disease that, when we are urged by strong necessity, and when the Lord himself prompts us by a secret movement of the Spirit, we seek God, but, when we have obtained our wishes, ungrateful forgetfulness swallows up that feeling of piety. Thus poverty and hunger beget faith, but abundance kills it.

14. Show yourselves to the priests This reply was equivalent to saying, "You are clean;" for we know that the discernment of leprosy belonged to the priests, who were enjoined in the law to distinguish between the clean and the unclean, (Leviticus 14:2.) Thus Christ preserves their right entire, and appeals to them as witnesses for approving of the miracle which he had wrought; and we have accordingly said, that pious and devout sentiments concerning Christ must have been entertained by those men who were instantly led, by his bare word, to entertain the hope of a cure.

It happened that, while they were going, they were cleansed. Here was displayed the divine power of Christ and of his words, and there was also a proof of the high estimation in which God holds the obedience of faith; for the great suddenness of the cure arose from the confident hope which induced them to undertake the journey, without hesitation, at the command of Christ. But if that transitory faith—which wanted a living root, and produced nothing more than the blade—was honored by God with a remarkable effect, how much more valuable is the reward that awaits our faith, if it is sincerely and permanently fixed on God? Though the nine lepers derived no advantage to salvation from the cure of the flesh, but only obtained a temporary gift by means of a fleeting and transitory faith, yet this figure points out to us the great efficacy which will attend true faith.

15. And one of them, etc. It is uncertain if he returned when they were halfway, and Luke's words appear to imply this; but I think it more probable, that it was not till he had heard the decision of the priests that he returned to give thanks. He must have obtained permission from the priests to return to the ordinary intercourse of life; and he had no right to neglect the command of Christ, and to defraud the temple of God of a sacrifice. Some will perhaps be better pleased with a different conjecture, that as soon as he saw

that he was cleansed, and before he applied to the priests for a testimony, he was seized with a devout and holy zeal, and returned to the Author of the cure, so as to commence his sacrifice with thanksgiving. The words of Christ contain an expostulation with the whole nation; for it is by way of reproach that he draws a comparison between one stranger and many Jews, because it was customary with them to swallow up God's favors without any feeling of piety. And this was the reason why Christ gained hardly any reputation among them by miracles so numerous and so splendid. Let us learn that this complaint is brought generally against all of us, if we do not at least repay the divine favors by the duty of gratitude.

19. Thy faith hath saved thee. The word save is restricted by some commentators to the cleanness of the flesh. But if this be the case, since Christ commends the lively faith of this Samaritan, it may be asked, how were the other nine saved? for all of them without exception obtained the same cure. We must therefore arrive at the conclusion, that Christ has here pronounced a different estimate of the gift of God from that which is usually pronounced by ungodly men; namely, that it was a token or pledge of God's fatherly love. The nine lepers were cured; but as they wickedly efface the remembrance of the grace of God, the cure itself is debased and contaminated by their ingratitude, so that they do not derive from it the advantage which they ought. It is faith alone that sanctifies the gifts of God to us, so that they become pure, and, united to the lawful use of them, contribute to our salvation. Lastly, by this word Christ has informed us in what manner we lawfully enjoy divine favors. Hence we infer, that he included the eternal salvation of the soul along with the temporal gift. The Samaritan was saved by his faith. How? Certainly not because he was cured of leprosy, (for this was likewise obtained by the rest,) but because he was admitted into the number of the children of God, and received from His hand a pledge of fatherly kindness.

The kingdom of God will not come with observation. My opinion is, that Christ now disregards those dogs, and accommodates this reply to the disciples; just as on many other occasions, when he was provoked by wicked men, and seized the opportunity of giving instruction. In this manner God disappoints their malice, while the truth, which is maintained in opposition to their sophistry, is the more fully displayed.

The word observation is here employed by Christ to denote extraordinary splendor; and he declares, that the kingdom of God will not make its appearance at a distance, or attended by pompous display. He means, that they are greatly mistaken who seek with the eyes of the flesh the kingdom of God, which is in no respect carnal or earthly, for it is nothing else than the inward and spiritual renewal of the soul. From the nature of the kingdom itself he shows that they are altogether in the wrong, who look around here or there, in order to observe visible marks. "That restoration of the Church," he tells us, "which God has promised, must be looked for within; for, by quickening his elect into a heavenly newness of life, he establishes his kingdom within them." And thus he indirectly reproves the stupidity of the Pharisees, because they aimed at nothing but what was earthly and fading. It must be observed, however, that Christ speaks only of the beginnings of the kingdom of God; for we now begin to be formed anew by the Spirit after the image of God, in order

that our entire renovation, and that of the whole world, may afterwards follow in due time.