

HOMILY for 28th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year C

This Sunday's Readings tell about the virtue of gratitude. Reflecting on it, I'm reminded of this cute story that I'd like to share with you.

It was the church's annual Christmas dinner, & little Ben was asked to pray & give thanks before they eat. The church members bowed their heads, & Ben began his prayer, thanking God for all his friends, naming them one by one. Then, he thanked God for Mommy, Daddy, brother, sister, Grandma, Grandpa, all his aunts & uncles, Pastor Wright & Mrs. Wright, their kids, & his Sunday school class. Then, he began thanking God for the food. He prayed a mighty thank-you for the turkey, the dressing, the fruit salads, the cranberry sauces, the pies, even the Cool Whip.

Then he paused, & everyone waited. After a long silence, the young boy looked up at his mother & asked, "If I thank God for Mrs. Wright's broccoli casserole, won't He know I'm lying?"

Anyway, leprosy was one of the devastating diseases in Biblical time. It was so deadly & contagious that people had to keep lepers away from the population by making these to live outside of the city gates. That is why this Sunday's Gospel tells us, "...As He [Jesus] was entering a village, ten lepers met Him. Keeping their distance, they raised their voices & said, 'Jesus Master, have pity on us!'" As you can see, Jesus met ten lepers outside of a village, & they all kept a distance from Him as being required by the Law. For society did not want them to infect more people & destroy the whole community. We can only imagine how lowly & isolated a leper must have felt. Most of us here probably have not met a leper in our lives. Speaking for myself, I had seen a lot of lepers as a kid growing up in Viet Nam. In fact, I encountered a whole family with leprosy everyday & felt their pain & struggle as the adults & kids had to sit at the corner of an outdoor market or walk door to door to beg for food & daily necessities. Leprosy left them with hideous lumps & bleeding on their faces & whole bodies. Everyone would shun them as society would keep them away from the population. In fact, Viet Nam had a whole island designated to house lepers & keep them far away from the community for fear of infection.

Like me, Jesus felt their pain & showed the ten lepers in this Sunday's Gospel by trying to heal them & saying, "Go & show yourselves to the priests." That way they would be welcomed back into the community. We are told that on their way there they were all cured. Common sense tells us that all ten lepers would return & give thanks to God for their life-changing miracle & God's love for them. Unfortunately, only one of them came back to give thanks to God. Here is how Jesus reacted to it, "...Were not all ten made whole? Where are the other nine? Was there no one to return & give thanks to God except this foreigner?" It is sad to see such an ingratitude by God's people even in Jesus' time.

This Sunday's First Reading shares with us another rare example of a non-believer Naaman who came back to give thanks to God for healing him & said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel. Please accept a gift from your servant." So, a non-believer like Naaman had enough common sense & decency to give thanks & praise to God for loving him & blessing him with that life-changing miracle. Again, Naaman is another rare example of gratitude that the Bible wants to show us & hopes that the people of God and the whole world would imitate him & practice gratitude every day. So, what is it about the virtue of gratitude that Jesus & the Bible would want us Christians & the whole world to live by? How could that simple virtue change our world & make it better?

A French Proverb says, "Gratitude is the heart's memory." When a grateful person like the foreigner in this Sunday's Gospel or First Reading returns to give thanks to God for a blessing/miracle, he remembers what God did for him & cherishes God's love for him. While doing that, he also gives credit where credit is due, namely, God. As far as he is concerned, God continues to love him & has shown it with that blessing/miracle. That attitude is something we humans are not born with. We humans must learn to be grateful & have a grateful attitude. That is why we have seen parents/grandparents try to teach their young children/grandchildren to acquire a grateful attitude by saying "Thank you" to someone who gives them something. If parents/grandparents do not teach the young to have a grateful attitude, we will have a whole generation of ingrates. Then, we will have a world full of greedy & entitlement folks.

That seems to be the status of our current world. Our country is the most blessed & wealthiest on the planet. Yet, its elites – the wealthy & the powerful – do not think that they have enough worldly things & desire to have more. Meanwhile, our young do not see the value of hard work & have adopted an entitlement attitude instead of gratitude. Furthermore, our school system has pushed its education to concentrate more on technology & freedom instead of teaching our young to work on gratitude & spiritual values. That is why we have seen all kinds of social problems & exponential rise of violence right now. If our world does not use gratitude as the foundation to build a society, we will continue to see all the current social problems & a lot more in the future.

However, the lack of focus on gratitude is not only a problem of our world & its educational system. It is also a problem of the Church & other religions. Because Christianity, for example, has focused more on social issues such as abortion & cancel culture instead of gratitude & other spiritual virtues. That is why we have seen divisions & fighting within the Church. Its members do not see the reasons to pray daily & come back to church every weekend to give thanks to God. People only pray or come to church when they need God to do something for them. Very few people would pray daily or come to church every weekend to give thanks to God for His love & blessings in their lives. That is why I thank God for an elderly charter member of our parish who taught me a valuable lesson of showing gratitude to God every time I pray. Before she went home to the Lord, she would attend daily Mass & give thanks to God in her prayer prior to asking God for anything. If everyone would have her grateful attitude, we would be people of virtues & more connected to God the source of love & all blessings. We would allow other virtues such as love, kindness, compassion, peace, patience, faithfulness, humility, gentleness, generosity, hope, & many more to prosper in us/the Church/our world. We would have a closer relationship with God & truly follow His Commandments. More importantly, we would be able to build a just & peaceful world. For everyone would look at everything on earth as God's blessings for us to be used for the common good instead of keeping them all to ourselves. Best of all, all the chaos & violence we see now would be driven away to make room for peace & love.

My dear brothers & sisters, gratitude is the foundation of our human relation with God & our appreciation of one another. Without this basic virtue, we would only think about ourselves & then take God & everyone around us for granted. That is definitely the recipe for a selfish, greedy, & violent world that we see right now. However, we do have power to change it into a caring, generous, & peaceful world by taking every opportunity to say "Thank you" to God & everyone around us.