

The Healing of the Ten Lepers

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As we draw closer to Holy Nativity, it can be easy to get caught up in the sights and sounds all around us, including the sight of a baby in a manger. As attractive as that is, we all know that this child was not just another baby. This was the birth of the Promised One, the Anointed One, the one that Isaiah prophesied would be born of a virgin. He wrote: “The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel,” which means “God with us”.

Think about that for a minute. Some words to a song on one of my favourite Christmas recordings goes something like this: I hope they understand that “this Jesus that they celebrate is more than just a man.” Yes, He is “God with us” - God taking on human flesh for us and for our salvation.

In our Gospel today, we hear the account of the ten lepers. Remember that leprosy was very contagious, and these people would be shunned by everybody else. In fact, it was their duty to cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” whenever anyone came too close to them. But when they see Jesus in the distance and recognize Him, they shout out different words.

They cry: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” Essentially, they are inviting Jesus to come closer to them rather than sending Him away. Jesus heard them, and instructed them to do what the Law told them to do to test that their leprosy was gone, was healed. On the way, one of them sees what has happened to his skin and stops, turns around, and searches for Jesus. He was returning to say “thank you”. He finds Jesus and loudly glorifies God, falling on his face in front of Jesus in worship. The wording of these verses implies the truth that in giving thanks to Jesus, this former leper is glorifying God.

Our epistle teaches us just that, that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” - that is, that He is the One who makes God visible, which is why Jesus is the one depicted in human form in the Church’s iconography. No one has seen the Father, but...whoever has seen Me, Jesus said, has seen the Father. He is the image of the invisible God.

He is also the creator; He is eternal; He is the sustainer, the One who holds all things together. Yes, He is certainly “more than just a man,” more than just a human being. He is the eternal God in human flesh, as our Creed teaches us, “true God of true God...of one essence with the Father...who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became man...” Why? So that we could be raised out of the muck and the mire of sin and be “made a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour”.

Yesterday and today, we can see that in the lives of two wonderful saints, St. Nicholas of Myra and St. Ambrose of Milan. In reading the accounts of their lives, I was encouraged that these were not men who spent years in a desert or in a monastery, which is the lot of all of us. In fact, when St. Nicholas made efforts to do that, God more than once redirected him. The second time God spoke these words to him: “Nicholas, this is not the vineyard

where you shall bear fruit for Me. Return to the world, and glorify My name there.” And he went on to bless many with his generosity, his almsgiving, as well as through the many miracles that God has worked through him down through the centuries.

St. Ambrose, too, was called to serve God in the Church as a bishop, which he took very seriously. He had great influence with those in high political office, including the Emperor Theodosius, who was the one who initiated the Council of Constantinople, the Second Ecumenical Council, in 381. Some years later, when Theodosius was at the height of his glory, he reacted to the killing of the governor of Thessalonica by carrying out a massacre of 7,000 people in that city. When Theodosius later visited Milan and attempted to attend church at the cathedral there where Ambrose was bishop, the holy bishop informed him of God's anger over his actions in Thessalonica, and barred him from the church and from the Holy Eucharist. The Emperor responded with great contrition and "withdrew weeping to his palace", accepting the discipline of the Church.

Some months later, he visited Milan again, and on Christmas Day he returned to the cathedral and fell at the feet of Ambrose, and begged with tears to be found worthy of participation in the Holy Mysteries. He obtained pardon of the Bishop, and when the moment came to take divine communion, he went into the sanctuary among the clergy, as was the custom in Constantinople. But the servant of God, Ambrose, humbled him once again in the sight of all. He turned and rebuffed him, saying, "Go out from here and stay in your place among the laity, because the purple does not make priests, but emperors." The Emperor left without a word and took his place among the penitents, so great was his respect for Ambrose. On his return to Constantinople, he never again dared enter the sanctuary to receive holy communion.

How could St. Ambrose do that? He understood Who he was serving, that the thrice holy God is the King of Kings, and that the Church and the secular power needed to be independent of each other. Just like the prophets of the Old Testament, St. Ambrose spoke God's words to the emperors of his day.

We, too, serve the One who came to this earth to be "God with us", the One who is King of kings and Lord of lords. He is our God, and we are His people. Let us, too, come before His face with thanksgiving, and enter His courts with praise, just like that leper. Thankfulness is the overflow of a full heart, so like the leper, let us, too, be quick to give thanks to God when He does something special in our lives.