

That encounter between Jesus and the ten lepers was the subject of my first ever sermon, many moons ago! To be honest, I don't remember my 'main point', but I do recall when reading commentaries on this short passage the joy of discovering level upon level of meaning in the text.

It's a story with which we will all be very familiar, but perhaps on hearing it again we noticed that in healing the lepers Jesus did not actually touch them. Instead, he simply instructed them to 'show themselves to the priests'. This was what anyone who had recovered from leprosy would have to do in order to be pronounced clean – and thereby allowed to return to community life. In faith, the ten responded by setting off to see the priests, still bearing their leprous scars – and on their way they discovered their skin had become clean! The condition which had brought with it their exclusion from the community had fallen away: their freedom had been restored.

Surely, all this tells us much about Jesus' power to heal and to save, a point echoed in our first reading. Surely, we can trust in that same gracious power.

We also heard that only one leper bothered to thank Jesus for having been healed – and that he was a 'foreigner'. That reminder of the importance of thanksgiving is appropriate for this time of year, the season of Harvest Thanksgivings such as ours last week.

In today's second reading, we heard from Saint Paul – who is known as the 'apostle to the Gentiles (that is, the foreigners!)'. Paul proclaimed very firmly and very clearly that the gospel is open to *all* – and yet in today's passage he mentions the 'elect'. In doing so, he might seem to be saying that some are destined for salvation and others not. Now, I don't propose to enter a theological debate on 'predestination', except to say that whereas in Old Testament times Israel was seen as God's 'chosen people', this place is taken in the New Testament by the worldwide Church.

Significantly however, no one is born into membership of the Church: those who belong are those who have been 'born from above': received by baptism into Christ's Church. And baptism is a choice, a personal choice to respond to God's free gift of grace.

Indeed, Saint Paul goes on to say, 'if we have died with [Christ], we will also live with him', which is exactly what baptism symbolises. In baptism we choose to become a Christian; in it we die to sin and become a 'new creation'.

As brothers and sisters in Christ our task is to believe and trust in his power to heal and save, striving day by day to become the people he would have us be. In Paul's words, we are to 'do [our] best to present ourselves to God as one approved by him'. And as members together of the Body of Christ we have equal standing in God's sight, each of us held in the same state of grace.

This beautiful prayer is said for the candidates at any baptism service: I invite you to imagine it being said for you:

May God who has received you by baptism into his Church, / pour upon you the riches of his grace, / that within the company of Christ's pilgrim people you may daily be renewed by his anointing Spirit, / and come to the inheritance of the saints in glory.

Amen.

So, we have a lot to be thankful for, and last week at our Harvest Festival we gave thanks to God for his rich providence. Today, it seems reasonable to be considering how we use and how we share God's many 'good gifts around us' (including our time and talents). One aspect of this is to reflect on our 'stewardship' of these precious gifts, and on our attitude towards membership of both the worldwide Church and the local church. In essence, this is a good time of year to review how we express our commitment as Christians.

My article in this month's Parish Magazine explores the nature of stewardship, and offers reflections on a range of different attitudes towards the work of the Church.

But before we each embark on an 'annual review' of the stewardship of 'our time, our abilities, our possessions, our money, our whole lives' I would like simply to say thank you for all that you do as a member of your church. Your commitment is very greatly appreciated because in this church community, like any church community, we all depend on each other.

Today, if you are a member of the Planned Giving scheme of this church you will be receiving a letter from me, a letter entitled 'Thank you'.

I begin by saying, 'I write to express my sincere thanks for your support of the mission and ministry of our church through your generous gifts of time, talents and money.'

I mention how important it is for our church to be able to rely on a stable source of income, and therefore how grateful I am to each and every member of our Planned Giving scheme – no matter how great or small the regular amount given.

And I end the letter by expressing my thanks for the time and talents freely given '...across a diverse range of activities in the life, worship, mission and ministry of our church.'

I then say, 'To help us all become better integrated and more focused as we seek together to be *a people and place where love works* our Parish Development Group will be launching an action plan early next year. Your time and talents and commitment will become key components of this plan: each contribution is vital; each contribution is very greatly appreciated.'

So as I thank you for your commitment to our church, and as we all give thanks to God for his good gifts, we acknowledge God's gracious, loving, healing, liberating and atoning power in Christ. And we rejoice that we are baptised members together of a 'royal priesthood'. My we truly become *a people and place where love works*.

Thanks be to God. Amen.