

There was a book published in the 1980's entitled THE NUN, THE INFIDEL AND THE SUPERMAN. It was dramatized into a play named The Best of Friends. I saw it on Masterpiece Theatre many years ago. It is about the friendship mostly by correspondence between Abbess Laurentia McLochlan, the Nun, and Sir Sidney Cockerell, a museum director, the Infidel, and George Bernard Shaw, the Superman.

I remember one scene where Shaw visits Abbess Laurentia at her Benedictine Abbey, Stanbrook, to bring her a gift. He had come back from a visit to the Holy Land. He brought her two small stones from a path at one of the holy shrines, maybe it was Bethlehem. She tossed one of the stones onto the gravel path of the monastery. Maybe in her piety she thought when she and the nuns were walking on the monastery path they would touch a stone that Jesus might have walked on. She said she would keep the second stone as a precious gift from a holy site that she would never have opportunity to visit.

We heard in today's first reading Naaman asking the prophet Elisha to let him have two mule loads of Israel's dirt to take home to Aram. Why? Because in the pagan understanding of his times each nation had a territorial god or goddess or several of them. The Moabites had their idol Chemosh. There was Astarte, the goddess of the Sidonians. The Ammonites had Milcom and Rimmon.

Naaman knew he was healed of his leprosy by following the instructions of the prophet Elisha, a mouthpiece for Israel's God. The healing happened in the waters of the Jordan, not in a river of his home city Damascus. So Naaman promised he would not offer sacrifices to any other god except to 'the Lord', Israel's God. He reasoned that when he got home he would do that most fittingly by standing on those mounds of earth from the Lord's territory.

In the next two verses not included in today's reading Naaman tells Elisha, the prophet, "I trust the Lord will forgive your servant this: when my master enters the temple of Rimmon to worship there, then, I, too as his adjutant, must bow down in the temple of Rimmon. May the Lord forgive your servant this." Elisha said to him "Go in peace."

How many human situations are there like that? Some people have to work on Sundays or else they cannot pay the rent or have food on the table. They cannot keep holy the Sabbath the way they wish. They too have to ask the Lord to forgive them for that. A spouse in mixed marriages can find himself or herself pleading in their prayer for the same mercy when they cannot practice their faith because of the partner's different beliefs. For the sake of the preservation of one good, like fidelity to one's marriage vows, one has to compromise on another good, like the external signs of fidelity to God by religious rites and devotions. In the gospel we have another good example from a foreigner to imitate. The Samaritan was the only one of the ten healed of leprosy who returned giving glory to God, falling at the feet of Jesus to give him thanks. Jesus told him, "Stand up and go; your faith has saved you."

So what message, what lessons do we take home from today's scriptures? The lesson from the gospel is clear: it is right and just always and everywhere to give God thanks. We read in Psalm 103: "...forget not all his benefits; he pardons all your iniquities, he heals all your ills, he redeems your life from destruction, he crowns you with kindness and compassion, he fills your lifetime with good, your youth is renewed like the eagle's." For so many gifts from God's loving kindness he deserves our thanks, over and over.

Naaman's plea for mercy connected to the first reading fits in well with this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy that we are in. Aware of our sins, our weaknesses and compromises, we have to trust in God's mercy too. The Jubilee year will end on December 8th, but praise God, mercy endures forever. The greatest thing that God has done for us surpasses those mentioned earlier in the psalm. It is the gift of his obedient Son as our Redeemer and Savior, who has promised eternal life to those who keep his commandments and follow his example.

The best way that together as God's people we can render praise and thanksgiving for all the blessings and mercies we have received is to offer at the altar the most acceptable sacrifice, that of God's own beloved Son. He became man, walked on this earth, suffered, died and rose, taking our humanity to heaven to be clothed in his glory. There he eternally shows the Father his wounds of love. For their sake God renders unlimited mercy for our weakness and waywardness so long as we earnestly strive to be members of our Savior's body. To our compassionate Father, the beloved Son and the Holy Spirit let us always give praise, thanksgiving, honor and loving obedience now and forever. AMEN