

28th Sunday Year C

Fr Peter Groves

II Kings 5

II Timothy 2.8

Luke 17.11-19

Remember Jesus Christ. So begins our epistle reading, from the second letter to Timothy. Remember Jesus Christ. Those were the words with which my diocesan bishop began his ordination charge, the lengthy oration delivered to candidates on the eve of their becoming deacons or priests. And no doubt we will agree that it is a good thing for those who are ordained to “Remember Jesus Christ.” I’m pleased to say that I do. I do not, however, remember a single word which followed from that ordination charge, so perhaps the rest of it was not quite so effective.

However, at this time of year, I do remember all too clearly my arrival in Oxford twenty seven

years ago as a new and utterly terrified undergraduate. It's a memory which is unlikely to fade, which presumably reveals just how intensely nervous I was. Coming from a very ordinary comprehensive school in north east London to the grandeur of New College was enough on its own, but it quickly got worse. Having said goodbye to my parents and unpacked a few things, I ventured across the hallway and knocked on the open door to introduce myself to the chap opposite. He was perfectly pleasant, though he did, to me, sound as if he had walked straight off the film set of *Brideshead Revisited*. As if knowing all my fears, he quickly asked me "Are you Winchester"? I froze. I just about knew that Winchester was the name of a very posh boarding school, and that it had some sort of historic link with New College. But the idea that someone might casually assume that I was from such a place seemed to confirm all my terrors. My inquisitor was from another very posh school called Harrow. I knew he wouldn't have heard of my comprehensive school, indeed I wondered

whether he had heard that there were such things as comprehensive schools, let alone that their pupils were allowed to attend Oxford. The predictable thoughts rushed through my mind – it's all true, everyone's an aristocrat, I don't belong here, I've got to go home.

I felt very keenly that I was an outsider. That didn't last long – I quickly found that most people were rather more like me than like my Harrovian friend – but just for a little while I felt alone. That feeling of being marked out, of not fitting in, of lacking any of the security on which we tend to rely for our daily lives, was remarkably, if briefly, disconcerting, so much so that I relive it to some small extent every year when we welcome new students to Oxford. Most of us have experienced something like that feeling at some stage, and it stays with us not least because it stands in such contrast to the later feeling of belonging and happiness which for most people follows as we settle into new surroundings.

For some, however, the experience of being an outsider remains part of their identity. Those we meet in our other two readings this morning fit into that category. Naaman the Syrian general has come all the way south to find the prophet Elisha, having been told that there is a prophet in Israel who can heal his leprosy. He comes looking for signs and wonders, for something akin to a magic show, and is outraged when instructed to do nothing more than bathe in the nearby river. Of course, when he bathes, he is indeed cured. Although his leprosy makes him different from those around him, his status remains all too grand. As a general and a leader of men, he expects the spectacular, and is confounded by the revelation that the healing grace of God is all too simple, knowing nothing of performance and social standing, and everything of acceptance, love and restoration. Naaman learns that it is the simple which is truly miraculous.

The gospel story that we heard concerns not one but ten lepers, who cry out to Jesus for help in their affliction. Their appeal to him is highly significant. The words we translate as master – *epistates* – is Luke’s word for Rabbi, and this is the only occasion in the gospel where it is used by someone other than a disciple of Jesus. Or I should say, someone other than an existing disciple of Jesus, for by putting the word on the lips of the lepers, the evangelist is urging us to rethink our definition of disciple. The lepers place their faith in Jesus and learn from him the truth of God’s act of recreation, transforming their very existence from nothing to everything by the word of his mouth. Immediately before this episode takes place, we have seen Jesus upbraid those called apostles for the smallness of their faith. Here those who should be outcasts are displaying the faith which others seem to lack.

But the point is made more explicit by what follows. While all ten appeal for help from the master or teacher who is Jesus, and all ten are

made whole, only one returns to offer thanks. This one, already known to us as a leper, is revealed to be an outsider among outsiders, since he is also a Samaritan. The ten are told to go and show themselves to the priests, but this one – the Samaritan – cannot do as he is told, he cannot enter the inner precincts of the temple because his race sets him apart. His own people have their own temple and their own practices. He does not belong in the temple in Jerusalem. He returns, and he gives thanks, and in so doing, he shows us true discipleship.

Throughout Luke's gospel, we see the image of the temple – the place in which God dwells – being contrasted with and succeeded by the image of Jesus himself – not a place, but a person, in whom the presence of God now inhabits the world. By returning to the source of his healing and offering thanks, the Samaritan healed of his leprosy displays his learning to those around him, he manifests the truth that being a disciple, one who learns, is being someone whose focus is on Jesus and his mission. He is

someone who understands that the creative love of God is at work in this Galilean stranger making his way relentlessly towards Jerusalem, towards his vocation to suffer and to die at the hands of those who would protect the old ways, the old distinctions, the barriers to outsiders, the security of the familiar. The outcast, the outsider, the leper who is also a Samaritan, turns out to be the revelation of God's new creation in which all our expectations are turned upon their heads.

So if we feel as if we don't belong, perhaps there is cause for optimism. More worrying, however, is the opposite notion. If we feel we do belong, if we are comfortable in our security and giving thanks that we are not the nervous newcomer, not the outsider far from home, then we might have some cause for concern. For Jesus makes it all too clear which side we should be on. Very soon afterwards in Luke's gospel we find the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, in which the one who knows himself to be a sinner is the one who actually justified. Very soon after that we read

the story of Zacchaeus, the hated publican whom Jesus calls down from the tree to a new and transformed existence. The judgements we thought we could make, the distinctions on which we are so ready to rely, will be subverted at every turn. The gospel is not comfortable in a world of vulnerability and injustice. The calling to which we should aspire is the calling of those lepers – Jesus, Master, have mercy on us, in the hope of his uttering the words we need so badly to hear: Your faith has made you well.