

Go Forth...

A SERVICE OF U.S. CATHOLIC MISSION ASSOCIATION

MISSIONARY COMMENTARY

COMPASSION: THE HEART OF MISSION

SUNDAY READINGS:

2 KINGS 5:14-17

PSALM 98:1-4

2 TIMOTHY 2:8-13

LUKE 17:11-19

AUTHENTIC COMPASSIONATE SERVICE

An obvious parallel exists between today's first reading and the Gospel: the curing of victims of leprosy. Naaman the Syrian is mentioned by name in today's first reading which gives the story of his cure from the scourge of leprosy; we also hear the full account (II Kings 5:1-15) during Lent (Third Monday).

A close examination of the narrative shows that he is asked by the prophet Elisha to do something very ordinary: to go and wash seven times in the Jordan. He became angry, because the prophet did not perform an elaborate ceremony to cure him. However, he is finally convinced to follow the prophet's advice—and he is totally cured of his disease.

In the Gospel the ten lepers call out: "Jesus! Master! Have pity on us." Jesus heals them and asks them to be "certified" by the Jewish priests that they have been cured. Surprisingly, only one returns to express his gratitude to Jesus. Jesus confirms the grateful Samaritan's "profound healing" by telling him: "Stand up and go; your faith has saved you."

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A Leper Saint. These Scripture narratives invite us to recall the life of a sterling missionary who profoundly transformed people's lives. Jozef Damien de Veuster, popularly known as "Damien the Leper," was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on October 11, 2009. Born in 1840 on a small farm near Louvain in Belgium, he left for Hawaii in 1863 and arrived six months later; he was ordained in Honolulu in May 1864. Damien served for nine years on the Island of Hawaii. In early 1873, he was the first priest volunteer who offered himself to serve the lepers who were segregated on the island of Molokai, since there was no known cure for the dreaded disease which was ravaging the island archipelago.

Damien's assignment letter from Father Modeste, his religious superior, read: "You may stay as long as your devotion dictates." Damien read the letter over and over again—until his death sixteen years later at age 49. As a missionary on Molokai, Damien wrote his brother in Europe: "I make myself a leper with the lepers to gain all for Jesus Christ. That is why, in preaching, I say 'we lepers,' not, 'my brethren'."

Model of Genuine Service. Damien strove to configure himself to Christ. He died on April 15, 1889; it was Holy Week. Damien lived a transformed and transforming life. His example of service of the poor inspires us not to forget the needy right in our midst. A unique statue of Damien stands at the entrance to the Hawaii State Capital. We sincerely ask the Lord for healing from our own "leprosy."

God comes to us daily in the very ordinary events of life; we do not wait for spectacular, "miraculous" events to find God's presence. As Saint Ignatius of Loyola teaches, we should find God in all things. God is present in creation's beauty, in a child's smile, in the dedication of parents and teachers, in a simple act of asking for forgiveness, in a mother or father faithfully caring for their family, in the visit to a sick person or a neighbor in need. We pray: Lord, open my eyes to see you in everyday, ordinary events. Saint Damien, apostle of compassion, pray for us.

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NOTES ON THE SUNDAY READINGS:

First Reading – 2 Kings 5:14-17: The writings of the Old Testament show God's preparation for Jesus. The various stories about Elisha (9th century BC) contain the narrative about Naaman. As military commander of Syria, Naaman contracted leprosy and was directed by Elisha to wash in the Jordan River.

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 98:1-4: This psalm points to all nations (the gentiles, the non-Jews) to recognize God's saving power, "for he has done wondrous deeds..., he has made his salvation known..., he has revealed his justice..., he has remembered his kindness and his faithfulness."

Second Reading – 2 Timothy 2:8-13: Today's passage continues Paul's pastoral advice to the young bishop, Timothy. Paul writes from prison where he is facing death. Yet, he seeks to encourage Timothy to be a good bishop and do his work well—all for the sake of Jesus Christ and the Gospel, noting that the Word of God cannot be chained.

Gospel – Luke 17:11-19: Our Gospel today speaks of Jesus' resolute journey toward Jerusalem, the city of his destiny. The passage illustrates a favorite Lucan theme: the love of Jesus for the unfortunate of society—here a Samaritan. All this reminds us of God's great kindness to us and our duty to give God lifelong thanks and praise.

Notes and Commentary by Maryknoller James H. Kroeger, who has recently published ***Walking with Pope Francis: The Official Documents in Everyday Language*** (Orbis Books) as well as ***Exploring Vatican II Treasures: Actors, Events, Insights*** and ***A Joyful Journey with Pope Francis*** (Faith Alive Books).

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