

"WHEN THE GIFT OBSCURES THE GIVER"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

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TEXT: "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?"  
(Luke 17: 17)

INTRODUCTION "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?" In a world in which it's difficult to get a consensus on any moral value, I'd hazard the hunch that most men and women would vote to renounce ingratitude. No one would seriously defend the ingrate - whether it be a son who gets too big for his mother and father, a public official who forgets the little people who backed him in his first campaign, a preacher who outgrows the Gospel, or some super-star athlete who demeans or ignores the fans who pay his salary.

It would seem that the story of Jesus and the Cleansing of the Ten Lepers provides us with a classic illustration of the sin of ingratitude. Our Lord was enroute to Jerusalem for the final time. As He passed along the border that separates Galilee from Samaria, He was attracted by a sight that was hard to bear. A cluster of ten dispirited people who were victims of leprosy cried out for mercy and healing. Jesus advised them to go and show themselves to the priests. The priests in their role as health officers were the only ones legally able to certify a clean bill of health. The lepers' plea was well rewarded for Luke reports that "As they went they were healed". (Luke 17: 14)

ONE CAME BACK TO GIVE THANKS Now what stirs us about this happening is the fact that only one returned to give thanks.  
As the narrative has it,

"One of them, when he saw that he was healed,  
turned back praising God with a loud voice;  
and he fell on his face at the feet of Jesus,  
giving him thanks."

One in ten. Not a very flattering percentage for the human race. And then, as if to put a lick of mustard on the point, Luke adds that the one who returned to give thanks was a Samaritan.

If this were a drama unfolding before our eyes, we would be tempted to hiss the nine. How could they be so insensitive? "Life raft" religion...that's about all they had.

"The devil was ill, the devil a monk would be.  
The devil was well, a devil of a monk was he".

It doesn't cost anything to say "thank you". The nine in our eyes are guilty of spiritual negligence. We fault them for conveniently forgetting. They were clearly in the wrong. How often we make the same mistake...conveniently forgetting....guilty of spiritual negligence. "Where are the nine?" said Jesus, "Were not ten cleansed?"

GIFT OBSCURES THE GIVER I'm not as hard on the "un-thanking" lepers as I use to be. After all, they did not outrightly repudiate or reject Jesus. They simply lost sight of Him in their newly found ecstasy. They allowed the gift to eclipse the giver. And this brings us to the main thought of today's sermon.

A. Boyce Gibson in his penetrating study of the religion of Dostoevsky notes that early in the celebrated Russian's life he drifted away from the faith of his family. Gibson described that drift in this manner:

"Dostoevsky did not exactly forget Christ, but he allowed Him to be crowded out by his own derivatives."

"Crowded out by his own derivatives". What a line. When I came across it, I thought to myself....a seed for an Advent sermon. Follow along, if you will.

"Where are the nine?" asked Jesus. Well...where were they? If we take His question literally rather than rhetorically we might do a bit of speculating as to where they actually were. Bear in mind that this was a socially enervating disease as well as a physically disabling one. The Greek word for leper comes from a verb that means "to scale or peel off". People in that day at least believed that leprosy was contagious. Thus, when one became a leper he was cast out - from his family, from the Temple, from the town - and made to wander about to fend for himself the best he could.

And ten obeyed Jesus' command and went off to see the priests. And, wonder of wonders, "as they went, they were healed". Try to feel your way into their ecstasy. They looked down at arms and legs that had been rendered hideous by scaly flesh and suddenly what they saw was pure and clean. They became deliriously happy.

Where did they go? One went to the village pub to celebrate with his old friends. One raced home for a family reunion; it had been years since he threw his arms around his mother and hugged her and kissed her. Another went on to see whether the girl to whom he had been engaged before those tell-tale spots appeared had waited for him. Still another, tired of living like a beggar, was intent on getting his old job back. And so it went with the rest. Christ had been crowded out of their lives by His own derivatives. The gift had suddenly obscured the giver.

WHERE ARE WE MOST LIKELY TO LOSE TOUCH WITH JESUS

But rather than speculate further on the forgetfulness of the nine, let bring it closer to home and ask ourselves a more profitable question: in which of His derivatives are we most likely to lose touch with Jesus?

We can, you know that. We can get so caught up in those things that bear His name that we lose touch with Him. Some might call it, "losing sight of the forest for the trees". Let me be more specific.

For one thing, I suggest that we are prone to lose Him in our very commitment to Christian principles for effective living. I wince when I hear the Gospel reduced to a set of principles, the mastery of which will make one healthy, wealthy and wise.

I believe it to be true that when one opens his or her life to Jesus, that life becomes an improved life. I believe that to know Christ is to manage our lives more effectively. To turn to Him is to experience an improvement in our personal relationships. We will do a better day's work. We will come into

possession of an inner peace that will help to ward off psychomatic illnesses. But to abstract these principles from the Gospel and to separate them from a living, on-going awareness of Jesus is to abuse the Gospel and our faith.

Jesus never intended to give us a set of self-operating principles that could be followed to our profit regardless of our identification with Him. He did not come to give us more rules by which to live the game of life. Had He done so, His yoke would not be easy, nor His burden light. He came to give us Himself!

I would suggest that another derivative of faith that can contribute to our neglect of Jesus would be the benevolent concerns and the religious organizations to which we're committed. It's wrong to polarize the Spirit and the organization which we do. I do not walk with those who feel that if we had the love of God in our hearts we would not need to be in anyway organized or put together for helping others. Remember that one of the earliest actions of the early Church was the formation of a group of deacons who were organized to care for certain widows who had been neglected. The Church itself is an organizational derivative of Jesus; we are called to be His lengthened shadow in the world.

But I ask whether it is not possible for Christian people like ourselves to lose Jesus in the Church...of all places? It can happen!

Is it not possible for us to become so deeply immersed in our various causes and committees and concerns that we forget the Very One who got us into the business in the first place? We can become so engrossed in benevolent business and charitable causes and lost in a veritable wilderness of charts and of correspondence, of memos and meetings with the end result that we lose the joy of it all...that we become hard and joyless inside..... impatient and ill-tempered.

November is a very busy month in the life of our Church with a number of legitimate derivatives of Jesus involving us in different ways - the bazaar, the budget, the recruitment of new members, preparing plans and programs for Christmas. I always breathe a bit easier when we come to the end of the month and hope (and pray) that in all of it we haven't lost sight of Him in whose name we're doing it! For some, the derivatives are far more fun and more exciting than walking with Jesus. That troubles me...

And every once in a while I run into Christian people who are so committed to this cause or sharing in this Crusade that they have no time for Jesus. They're so excited about their deliverance and freedom that they forget its source. The results is that they tend to be overspent and somewhat discouraged and fall prey to weariness and spiritual burnout.

CLOSING "Where are the nine? Were not ten cleansed?" James Russell Lowell was right on target when he suggested that "the gift without the giver is bare". And so it is. Jesus is not feeling sorry for Himself when He asks about the nine who didn't bother to respond and return with thanks. He's sorry for them....because all they got was the gift.

"Keep Christ in Christmas" is a familiar Advent saying. But "Keep Christ in Christianity" is a saying for all seasons. And this is the word I put before you on Advent Sunday, 1981. This year, let's do all we can do to make sure that Christ is in our Christianity...in all we do in His name in this Church...that It's a word we all need to hear. "Keep Christ in our Christianity".

He's at the heart of it. For what makes us Christian and keeps us so is not allegiance to principles, however lofty...not membership in an organization, however noble and good...not participation in causes and programs, however right and constructive...and beneficial they may be for others!

What makes us and keeps us Christian is our own inner and personal experience of Jesus. You are invited now to kindle that devotion and to enlarge that experience in the sharing of the bread and the taking of the cup on this Advent Sunday. And may these moments get us all back on the right track as we begin to prepare ourselves for His coming once again, and then to walk with Him through the days of the year that follow.

PRAYER Grant us, O God, the wisdom to trace our blessings to their source that we may love You more and more. Grant that not even your gifts may be allowed to come between ourselves and You, for You are far more than they.

O God, we thank You for the coming of Your Son, Jesus Christ into our world and into our lives. He comes as a gift for which we are joyfully thankful. Help us to prepare ourselves for that Second Coming when He comes looking for the fruits of the Spirit. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord, our Judge, our Friend.

Amen