

*Reflection - Drawing Close to God by Sam Lothead*

*Luke 17:11-19*

We talk a lot in church about God's *nearness* - about drawing close to God, and God drawing close to us. It is true, as St Augustine once wrote, that God is in truth, 'more inward' to us than our 'most inward part' - in other words, God sits at the very heart of us, nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Occasionally we might feel this reality, just briefly, just barely - or perhaps even often - we sense just how impossibly, wonderfully close God is.

But there are also times when God feels more distant - not completely absent, but a little further off - such as those times when prayer feels a bit more like calling out to God rather than whispering.

That is where the ten men suffering from leprosy find themselves at the beginning of the Gospel reading - they can see Jesus, they know Jesus is who they are looking for, but they 'keep their distance' and call out to him. We are not told why they stand a ways away, but however far, they have come to Jesus seeking mercy.

Jesus, cryptically, sends them away - 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.'

This could sound like a dismissal, or even rejection, but the ten have faith in the one they call their Master, and set off - even if on one level they feel they are heading in the wrong direction - that they are now walking *away* from the source of the mercy and healing they seek. And yet by their faith and trust, by doing as Jesus commanded, by taking the circuitous route, they are healed. Only one appears to notice, however, and comes back - it is implied that he turns back *before* he gets to the priests; before he has fully done what he was told to do.

But in faith he returns to Jesus, in order to give thanks to God - he prostrates himself before Christ.

Of the ten, this man is the one who ends up nearer to Jesus than where he began - his faith and Christ's healing - his desire to give thanks - all have drawn him close to be at Christ's feet.

So it often is for us throughout life - often we feel God is at a slight distance from us. We long to draw near, but part of us also struggles to get close - still, we try to be as faithful as we can. We try to do what Jesus commands, even if at times we feel like we're headed in the wrong direction, or even at times feel like we're getting further from God rather than closer.

As we walk, we too can take a moment to look down, to take stock, to see what has happened on the journey so far - we too might find ourselves struck by what is taking place, be it healing or another movement of the Holy Spirit - and we might want to turn around and give thanks - to return to the one who sent us out in the first place.

Trusting in God, and trying to do what God commands, we then follow our guts and our hearts, which are not the same as the desires of the flesh - if we feel moved to give thanks, or to go back, then we do so. Like the one out of the ten, we find ourselves closer to God, closer to Jesus, than when we began - our thankfulness and wonder overtakes whatever fear or reticence we started with - we forget all those things that held us back, and we find ourselves - just occasionally - at our Lord's feet.

Much like stories of healing in the Gospels, such experiences are miraculous and mysterious in equal measure - there is so much we don't know or that catches us by surprise.

All we can do is call out to God, even when we're nervous to draw close - try to listen to the response, and do the best we can - and when moved to thanks, by our heart or our gut - let such thankfulness bring us closer than we dare.

It is there, in those moments where we forget ourselves - where thankfulness and grace take over - that we discover just how close we can get to God, and just how close to us God already is.