

When we celebrate Mass we are joining in the self-offering of Christ to his Father, here to become bread broken for others, here to become the body of Christ broken for others. But before we join in this movement of his self-offering we share in the breaking of his word, in a sense also broken by it in order to be able to break it for others, to become Word for others. We may struggle with this conceptually but it's not our understanding that Christ is, at least initially, after but our obedience to his word. "*Do this in remembrance of me*" "Do this because I ask you. Do this because you trust me. Do this as an act of faith, or as an opportunity for faith, as a way of engendering or enjoying or enduring faith, as a way of joining in God's self offering to you. This is Jesus in word and action revealing God as gift and inviting us to join in this process of gift - this graced encounter.

Neither Elisha nor Jesus in today's readings, and indeed Paul, are asking the people they are speaking to to understand how faith works, and why, so much as to experience it, to act on it as if it were true. Naaman comes with all sorts of expectations, to be treated at least as the important person he is, and whom he represents. But Elisha, described here as the "*the prophet of Samaria,*" simply asks him to bathe in the river Jordan. At first he refuses and heads off home but one of his servants persuades him to give it a try, as a servant girl had initially set him off on his quest in Syria. He is learning to trust another's word, the word of a servant, a word at his service even as it commands and he finds he is cured, made whole again – and takes not only this word but some of the soil of this holy land back with him to Syria – the soil that is of Samaria.

And it's a Samaritan who affirms the nature of God as gift in Luke's story of the Ten Lepers – a mix of Galileans and Samaritans, that is of orthodox and non orthodox Jews who act on Jesus' word, and like Naaman find themselves cured by acting as if this word were true. And once again, it's the outsider, the doubly despised Samaritan who realises the true gift of God in what has happened to him and returns to thank Jesus, to acknowledge him as Saviour. And Jesus doesn't then command him to "*follow me*" as he does with others but simply sends him on his way. Perhaps he doesn't need further conversion he's understood the nature of faith – indeed his way as a Samaritan, as a marginalised Jew, is perhaps enough: he's a witness to the Gospel whatever his religious stance, and not unlike Naaman in this respect.

We see here how the word of God, the gift of God, transcends all boundaries. Paul is more specific in his understanding of faith – it's faith in the risen Christ, post-factum faith one might say, but still faith that initially comes through experience – indeed is total gift, not something he was even looking for, or at least looking for in the right way, for he certainly believed he was serving God in his persecution of these Christians, these un-orthodox Jews. He has to be knocked to the ground in order to understand that his way was not God's way after all and the beginnings of his faith lie in obedience to a word.

*"Get up and go into the city and you will be told what you are to do"*

It's not a matter of argument, which Paul must have found very hard to resist, but of acting as if the word were true, an act of faith in which he entrusts himself to the care of his former enemies. He is learning to die with Christ in order to live with him, to become bread broken for others, to become the body of Christ broken for others – to become Christ's very self and learn that even if he is unfaithful Christ is always faithful for he cannot disown his own self. This is the promise of the Mass however marginalised, or distanced from it we may feel.