

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

(Mt 8: 1-13)

(Poem Vol.2, pp. 181, 189-90; Gospel Vol.3, pp. 142, 152-3)

(Jesus cures the leper)

Amongst the many flowers, which perfume the earth and delight our eyes, I see the horrible spectre of a revolting, corroded leper, completely covered with sores.

The crowds shout with fear and rush back to the lower slopes of the mountain. Some of them gather stones to throw at the rash man.

But Jesus turns round with His arms fully stretched out and shouts: "Peace! Stay where you are: be not afraid. Put the stones down. Have mercy on a poor brother. He is a son of God, too."

The crowds obey, overwhelmed by the power of the Master, Who moves forward through the tall grass in bloom to a few steps from the leper, who, on his part, has understood that Jesus is protecting him, and has come nearer.

When he reaches Jesus, he prostrates himself, and the blooming grass envelops him like cool scented water. The flowers undulate and gather together, forming a veil over the miserable man concealed amongst them. Only the mournful voice that can be heard reminds people of the wretched creature lying there. It says: "Lord, if You want, You can cure me. Have mercy also on me!"

Jesus replies: "Raise your head and look at Me. A man who believes in Heaven must be able to look at it. And you do believe, because you are asking for a grace."

The grass is shaken and opens out once again. Like the head of a shipwrecked person emerging from the sea, the head of the leper appears, stripped of hair and beard. His head is a skull not yet entirely deprived of all flesh.

And yet Jesus does not disdain touching that forehead with the tips of His fingers, where there are no sores on the skin. But the skin on that spot is ashen-grey, scaly, and lies between two putrid erosions, one of which has destroyed his scalp, and the other has opened a hole where his right eye was, so that I could not say whether the ball of his eye is still in the huge socket, which, between his temple and his nose, lays bare his cheek-bone and his nasal cartilage, full of corruption. And Jesus, holding the fingertips of His lovely hand there, says: "I want it. Be cleansed."

And as if the man were not eaten away and covered with sores, but only covered with dirt on which cleansing waters were poured, the leprosy disappears at once. First the wounds heal; then his skin becomes clear, his right eye appears between fresh eyelids, his lips close round his yellowish teeth. Only his hair and beard are

missing, that is, there are only scanty tufts of hair where previously there was only a tiny piece of wholesome skin.

The crowds shout in amazement. And their joyful shouts tell the man that he is cured. He lifts his hands, so far concealed by the grass, he touches his eye, where the huge hole was; he touches his head, where the large sore showed the skull and feels his fresh skin. He stands up, looks at his chest, his hips... He is all wholesome and clean... He collapses once again on the flowery meadow weeping out of joy.

“Do not weep. Stand up and listen to Me. Go back to life according to the rite and do not tell anybody until you have accomplished it. Show yourself to the priest as soon as possible, make the offering prescribed by Moses as evidence of your miraculous cure.”

“It's for You that I should witness, my Lord!”

“You will witness for Me by loving My doctrine! Go.”

(Jesus meets the Centurian)

Jesus enters Capernaum coming from the country. Only the Twelve are with Him, nay, only eleven apostles, as John is not there. The usual greetings of the crowd form a vast range of expressions, from the entirely simple ones of children, to the rather shy ones of women, to the enraptured ones of people cured miraculously, and those which are either curious or ironical. There are enough to satisfy all tastes. And Jesus replies to everybody according to how He is greeted: caressing the little ones, blessing the women, smiling at those cured miraculously, and with deep respect for the others.

But this time the series is completed by the greeting of a centurion of the town, I think. He greets Him: “Hail, Master!” to which Jesus replies: “May God come to you.”

While the crowd draws close to see the outcome of the meeting, the centurion continues: “I have been waiting for You for several days. You do not recognise me as one of those who were listening to You on the Mount. I was wearing civilian clothes. Are You not asking me why I went there?”

“No, I am not, but what do you want from Me?”

“I have instructions to follow those who hold meetings, because too often Rome has had to regret having granted permission for apparently honest meetings. But seeing and listening to You, I thought of You as a... as a... I have a servant who is ill, Lord. He is lying in my house, in his bed, paralyzed by a disease of the bones and he suffers dreadfully. Our doctors cannot cure him. Your doctors refuse to come. I invited them to come because it is a disease caused by the corrupt air of this area and you know how to cure it with the herbs of the feversome soil of the shore where

the water stagnates before being absorbed by the sand of the sea. I am very sorry because he is a faithful servant.”

“I will come and cure him.”

“No, my Lord. I am not asking You to go to all that trouble. I am a heathen, filth, as far as you are concerned. If the Jewish doctors are afraid of becoming contaminated by coming to my house, all the more reason it would contaminate You, Who are divine. I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof, but if You say only one word here, my servant will be cured because You rule over everything. Now if I, who am subject to my authorities, the first being Caesar, for whom I must act, think and behave as I am told, can in turn order soldiers under me, and if I say to one: "Go", to another: "Come" and to a servant: "Do that", the first one will go where I send him, the other will come because I call him, and the third will do what I tell him, You, as You are Who You are, will be immediately obeyed by the disease, which will vanish.”

“But the disease is not a man...” objects Jesus.

“Neither are You a man, You are the Man. You can therefore give orders to elements and fevers, because everything is subject to Your power.”

Some elders of Capernaum take Jesus aside and say to Him: “He is a Roman, but listen to him because he is an honest man who respects and helps us. It was he who built our synagogue and he has given strict instructions to his soldiers not to gibe at us on Sabbaths. Grant him, therefore, the grace, for the sake of Your town, so that he may not be disappointed and irritated, and his fondness for us may not turn into hatred.”

And Jesus, after listening to them, turns round smiling at the centurion and says: “Go ahead and I will come after you.”

But the centurion says once again: “No, my Lord, I have told You: it would be a great honour if You entered under my roof, but I do not deserve so much; say only one word and my servant will be cured.”

“Let it be so. Go and have faith. This very moment the fever is leaving him and life is flowing back into his limbs. Endeavour to get Life to come also to your soul. Go.”

The centurion salutes, then bows and goes away.

Jesus watches him go away, then turns to the people present and says: “I solemnly tell you that I did not find so much faith in Israel.”
