

Dear sisters and brothers!

"They had a narrow escape!"

At the very last second.

The Ten, who we heard about in our New Testament reading, were already written off. No-one wanted anything to do with them anymore.

They'd been expelled from the city... diagnosis: leprosy.

A disease that disfigures the body - and repels others.

Just imagine! The lepers' illness lasted for months... years...

You can see your kids from afar - but cannot gather them in your arms... No contact is allowed. No touch possible.

You can only speak to your wife from afar, and slowly but surely the distance grows between the two of you, between you and your friends...

Leprosy means social death. It comes slowly and cruelly...

Suddenly you find yourself in a different world: a world with different rules and different perceptions. You can no longer cross the border to the normal world. You see from afar the place where you used to live. Family, friends, homes, happy times are at a painful distance...

From such distance the lepers see Jesus, who comes through their area. A rabbi doing miraculous things out there on the road in the normal world.

Will he notice them?

Will he walk past them?

Or will he stop and pay them attention?

They gather near the road, "**keeping their distance**", the Bible text says.

Keeping their distance – as spectators do – somewhere near the road where real life takes place, hoping and waiting that someone would notice them and not turn away. The situation of people then and now. But the 10 outcasts from our story did not allow themselves to suffer and wait in silence. They cry out loud and call for Jesus' attention.

"Jesus, Master, have mercy on us".

It may be pure despair that makes them shout. We can imagine them having tried so many things to be healed... and still there has been no cure.

They just try one last time... clutch at a last straw...

They have nothing to lose...

Maybe they sensed that there was a power in Jesus that could turn their lives upside down, a power that could make their lives whole and new.

The one who they called did not ask any questions.

He just stopped and looked.

When Jesus saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.

No spontaneous healing. No big show to entertain the crowds... No. The ten lepers were simply sent off:

Go, show yourselves to the priests.

Jesus stuck to the rules and regulations of the time. It was the priests who had to assess whether one was pure again, so to speak, whether one was socially acceptable ... The priests were the gateway back into the community. And as soon as the reply was positive, the way back was possible. "Yes, you are pure," – you may go back - back to the family, back to work, back to life.

The ten in our story set off, sent into the village to see the priests. I find this amazing! I am struck by how much will to live and how much motivation they still had... How little resignation there was, how little tendency to give up!

The end of it all was so uncertain to them. There had not been any promise of a miracle or any mention of healing. Nothing.

The only thing Jesus said to them was the simple demand: **“Go! Show yourselves.”**

The miracle happened only after they'd decided to set off and do what Jesus had said. It happened on the way... - and: “by the way”. Unremarkable and unspectacular, - and basically impossible to prove. It was not immediately obvious that Jesus had anything to do with what happened.

Was it a miracle?

Or was it something else that cured them?

The only sure fact is that what happened, happened by the way, on the road, as they moved towards the community so that all could see the miracle had taken place.

To be healed in body and soul is usually a process... something that happens “by the way”... Even in the immediate presence of Jesus, healing does not come with the stab of a finger. Healing is a path the lepers have to go on. And it keeps them in the tension of their present situation and their hopes for the future. They mustn't be discouraged

by their sorry condition, but go forward to new life, full of hope, trust and belief.

Only then does it happen,
suddenly,
and unexpectedly,
a gift from God,
by the way:

And as they went, they were cleansed.

"They had a narrow escape!"

At the very last second.

And then they can again hold their children in their arms, kiss their wives, and hug their friends. Touching is allowed again, meeting people, joining the healthy and seeing a future ahead..

The lepers rush back, as it seems, into their old lives...

At least, nine of them do.

They can't wait to meet up with their families, to go back to work, to make new plans and live.

That is understandable, isn't it? It is basically just normal. Then and now.

Once you are healed, you want to get re-connected as soon as possible with the world, to jump back onto the train of life.

That train had not stopped because someone was sick. It had not remained in the station because one seat – or ten seats – were left empty...

And therefore: Catch up! Move forward – make up for the months and years spent in isolation!

Take your chance!

Come back to normal... show the world that you are safe and sound.

To me it is not surprising that 9 of the 10 men immediately returned to their daily lives, that they were trying to leave behind all that could remind them of their disease. They wanted to forget the experience of having their bodies set against them, the experience of weakness, failure and maybe blame.

They rushed back into everyday life, calling out with their bodies and their voices: "We are healthy. We are back. We belong.

We are at home, and life is worth living again!"

One of them, when he saw he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice.

One of them stepped aside for a moment. He did not immediately return to everyday life. One of the ten stopped, went back to the place

of his illness, went back to the place of need and pain, but also to the place where the healing began.

As if time stood still for a moment, he pauses to think...

“What next?”

Did he need time to leave behind the experience of having been so sick, so alone, so sad?

Did he remember how vulnerable he had been? How his body had given in, how nobody cared or was allowed to care?

What should come next?

Did he remember the goals and plans he had before his illness? Could he simply and immediately slip back into the real world of real people with their ideas and ambitions, their striving for success and their focus on the wrong things?

There was one man who took a break in order to understand it all, to take it in and to fully grasp it: “I am back!”

And there he is:

with a changed perspective of life. Not only with the focus on power that counted in the “old” world, but with the precious experience of having survived.

One man took the time to remember, to re-think, maybe to re-invent his whole life...

He was back...

And the encounter with God in the crisis (the disease, the unemployment, the isolation and loneliness) must have been good for something... must have marked a change. It let the man become a different person altogether.

One of the 10 returned. After the encounter with Jesus he realized who was actually at the heart of all things...

In the face of the living and life-changing God, he saw the opportunity to change his whole life, to change his focus, walk new ways, try out new things and shape and form his life out of gratitude, pure gratitude.

And he praised God in a loud voice.

In a loud voice. At the beginning there was calling and shouting: “Jesus Master, have mercy on us.”

And at the end there is praise – again, in a loud voice. The praise seems to be the answer to the pleas from the beginning...

One of the ten did not take his health back home quietly, like a purchase made or a bargain bought... No. He proclaimed what good had been done to him: "I'm healthy – thanks to the Lord!"

There is one of ten who says it all: the crying out in despair, the presence of God, the newness of life, the healing and the happiness.

At the beginning there is a prayer and at the end there is worship. In a loud voice.

And in between I see this person who is healed after the encounter with Jesus,
By the way,
Incidentally even,
on the road where God was present and met the sick man.

God is still on this road and offers to meet us there with his healing...no matter who we are.

The man healed in the story was after all a Samaritan: the outcast of those days: in the eyes of the Jews, the non-believer, the lost.

God comes and meets us with his healing – all of us, no matter what.

Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me, bless the Lord and do not forget all his benefits. (Psalm 103)

Amen.

Let us pray with the tenth leper.

Let us offer thanks for our lives,
thanks for the events that made us happy in the past week.

Let us give thanks for friends and family,
for rest and relaxation,

for tasks accomplished and appointments kept.

Let us give thanks to God for meeting us with his healing,
and for being with us. Amen.