

God is everywhere. And God bless America is everywhere too. At this time of national emergency, shopkeepers, ballplayers, and bumper stickers are all saying the same thing: God bless America.

It's surprising because in America God has been missing in action for a while: no religious symbols are allowed in public places; no prayer is permitted in schools. The pledge of allegiance continues to use the expression "under God," and our coins carry the slogan "in God we trust." But even civil libertarians tolerate these references to the deity because they have historical or traditional value, not because they promote sincere beliefs. It's been OK to keep God on our money, as long as we don't mean the words there.

Now all of a sudden, atheism is no longer trendy. Signs big and small adorn public spaces and cheer our national heart with the words "God bless America." These words express a belief in God, that God is good, that faith in God is widely shared by complete strangers, and that God will bestow goodness upon America. The words "God bless America" generally appear with a flag and no religious emblem; they perhaps imply a political hope that God's blessings will be manifest specifically in the destruction of the enemies of our flag.

In some ways, our country has been like the healed lepers in today's gospel. God has blessed America in many ways. We have productive land that generates food for the world. We have beautiful places to visit. We enjoy unprecedented prosperity. We have powerful weapons. We have democratic and social ideals. We have freedoms. Yet in the midst of this abundance, we have taken for granted the God who provides everything. It's most obvious in the sudden acknowledgment of God's presence in so many shop windows, trucks, and homes.

In the story today, ten lepers approach Jesus, asking for mercy. He tells them to show themselves to the priests. On their way, they are cured. Lepers were supposed to show themselves to priests if they had been cured. But these were not yet cured when they started off on this journey. Their very trip indicated the depth of their faith. One of them returns to give thanks, and that one is a Samaritan who held differences of opinion from the Judean Jews regarding the content of scripture and the place and style of proper worship. Beyond the surprising miraculous cure, the story ends with the surprise that the only grateful leper was a Samaritan.

In American society, God has cured many of our ills. We have better race relations, an economy strong enough to lift poverty, and schools where technology continues to advance. God has blessed America. America has not always said thanks. Perhaps in heaven the return of the American people to public faith is like the surprising return of the Samaritan leper. In these days of darkness, the resurgence of national faith has brought a beacon of light. As we review the many blessings we have received, let us remember not just to ask God's blessing, but to give God thanks.