

Ordinary Sunday 28 (C)

Luke 17:11-19

Eucharistic People

Jesus enters a village and runs into a group of ten lepers. They cry out to him, “have mercy on us.” Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the local priests, promising by implication, that they’ll be healed – and they discover they are – all ten of them.

All ten were, undoubtedly, surprised at this discovery, even overjoyed. Perhaps they celebrated and ran to tell their family and friends. And maybe a few even took it for granted. Who knows. What we do know is that one not only felt thankful but decided to express his gratitude to Jesus and to God.

It’s a simple enough lesson about the place of gratitude in our lives, reminding us that thankfulness is fundamental to Christian life. In the text the verb for thank is the same one used when Jesus thanks God for the bread and wine at the last supper. It’s the basis for our word Eucharist – thanksgiving – the central act of our life as a faith community.

I wonder though if we realise what a powerful thing gratitude is. We tend to be thankful in response to a good thing that’s happened. But it’s something more. It’s a choice we make, as it was for the leper in the Gospel reading. Gratitude is indeed a response to the blessings of life, but it’s also a choice to see those blessings, to name them, and to express our gratitude in word and deed.

It’s one thing to feel thankful, but when we express our gratitude, something happens. As we give voice to our gratitude, we affect those around us, even shape the reality in which we live. Think about it... Faced with the events of any given day, gratitude isn’t the only emotion we might choose to express. There are reasons for gratitude, yes... and also reasons for fear, for anger, for frustration, for regret, for worry. And each one may well be legitimate and appropriate. And each one colours our experience. But we *choose* how much

value and importance each of these emotions will have in our lives by giving them expression – and as we do so we give them power in our lives.

The other day I made an appointment to see someone. It took some effort of my behalf to keep that appointment, and when the person failed to turn up, I was presented with a choice. Do I get angry and frustrated as a form of self-protection, or do I stop and ask, what's happening here? Perhaps this person had good reason not to show up. When we did finally meet up, the latter proved to be the case. They shared with me the tough stuff that was happening in their lives – and I gave thanks that they trusted me enough to talk honestly with me. I made the choice not to allow the anger and frustration colour that relationship, but rather the desire to be available.

Of course, it's not always easy to give thanks, especially when life is really tough. Gratitude isn't a command – it's an invitation. Though on many days we do have a choice as to how we respond to what life presents. Henri Nouwen said, 'I can choose to speak about goodness and beauty, even when my inner eye still looks for someone to accuse or something to call ugly. I can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and to look at the faces that smile, even while I still hear words of revenge and see grimaces of hatred... There is the option to look into the eyes of the One who came out to search for me and see therein that all I am and all I have is pure gift calling for gratitude.'

Thanksgiving is possible not because we think everything is rosy in the garden (this isn't about a Pollyanna approach to life), but because God is somehow present in the situation. It's a decision that makes room for God's transforming, renewing grace and goodness. Gratitude draws us out of ourselves into something greater and grander. It joins us to the source of blessing. It unites us with the giver of all love: God. That was the difference between the man who returned and the other nine. They all received the gift of healing, but the one man who turned back to give thanks, received a second blessing. He drew closer to the source of the gift, and that's what thanksgiving does. It brings us near to the giver of all good things.

Gratitude isn't the way of society. Listen to the news, read the newspaper, follow Facebook, and what you see is complaint, accusation, anger, resentment – so, if you choose to go down the thanksgiving track, be warned, it will turn you into a cultural revolutionary. And because it's so foreign, it needs to be practised. Gratitude is like a muscle that has to be trained and strengthened over time, and as you exercise it, watch how it touches others. When we express gratitude, we are saying to the other person far more than "Thanks." We're also saying "You matter. You're a valuable and cherished human being. I don't take you for granted. I honour you for who you are. At this moment you've enriched my life. You have given to me." It's been said, unexpressed gratitude is like winking at someone in the dark. You know how you feel about them, but they don't.

Thanksgiving is the thread that binds together all the patchwork squares of our lives. Difficult times, happy times, seasons of sickness and struggle, times of pleasure and delight; all can be sown together into something beautiful with the thread of gratitude. But if we lack that thread in our lives, then the patchwork falls to pieces; it becomes fragmented and our lives can turn bitter, steeped in resentment, accusation, and ingratitude.

So, beloved people of God, my sisters and brothers in Christ, for whom I give thanks, I invite you to join with me in becoming eucharist people – people of gratitude, people of thanksgiving. What's more, I invite us to put this into practice this now. Turn to those about you, and say, "Thank you for being you." ... Having done that, when you come to the altar to receive the gift of bread and wine, over which Jesus gave thanks, and declared to be his body and blood, give thanks for someone or something for which you are truly grateful. And then, today, and tomorrow, and all the tomorrows that follow, practice being eucharistic, and shock those about you with your gratitude.

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