

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

Luke 17:11-19

Eucharistic People

Jesus enters a village and comes across a group of ten men suffering from leprosy. They cry out to him, “Have mercy on us.” He 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.

I assume this discovery left them overjoyed, and perhaps they celebrated and rushed to share the news with their family and friends. Undoubtedly, they were thrilled, even thankful... though only one chose 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.

We probably tend to be thankful in response to a good thing that’s happened. But gratitude is something more. It’s a choice we make, as it was for the man in the Gospel story. Thanksgiving 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 may well seem legitimate. And each one colours our experience and how we choose to view life.

We *choose* how much importance and value 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.

And that’s what’s key – we’re making choices. When confronted by someone who is angry, do we respond with anger as a form of self-protection, or do we choose empathy, trying to understand the emotions of the other, and gratitude that the person was willing to be honest? When we’re set back in some endeavour, do we express frustration or a resolve to keep at it and gratitude for what we’ve learned through this setback? These are choices.

The renowned writer on spirituality, 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.¹

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

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Return of the Prodigal Son* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994), 85

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.

Of course, it's not always easy to give thanks, especially when life is really tough. And if what I'm suggesting seems too much at this time, that's okay. It will come. Gratitude isn't a command – it's an invitation. Something we grow into.

Though be aware, gratitude isn't the way of society. Listen to the news, follow social media, and what we see most of all 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.

It's 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 sewn 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, my sisters and brothers in Christ, for whom I give thanks, I invite you to join with me in becoming eucharistic people – people of gratitude, people of thanksgiving. And perhaps, when you come 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 grateful. And then, today, and tomorrow, and all the tomorrows that follow, practice being eucharistic, and shock those about you with your gratitude.

Alister Hendery
Preached at Waiapu Cathedral – 12.10.2022