

Gratitude

Jeremiah 29:1,4-7; Luke 17:11-19

The weeks have been particularly long of late for many of us involved with the church. Work in the sanctuary, job interviews, Session meeting, district visiting, funerals, caretaking duties, church officer duties, magazine production, training events and much more. It has been one of the busiest and most fraught start-up sessions we've had for some years with some extraordinary tasks needing done alongside the ordinary, day-to-day work of a large and busy church. Times have been occasionally tense as big decisions needed made quickly, and plans carefully laid had gone astray and been frustrated.

However, throughout this week there has been good reason to be thankful. A sad funeral, that went well. An afternoon service, where communion was shared with someone who had not had communion for a very long time. The Luke reading events, where an understanding of the Bible, and a sharing of faith and doubt was spiritually uplifting. Job interviews, which, we hope, have gone well for our church. Edinburgh City Council who, with the wonderful support of three of our local councillors, shifted their difficulties about digging up the road and permitted us to get on with connecting to the gas mains. It could all go horribly wrong, but by Friday of last week, when I thought there was little to be thankful for and this sermon was going to be unhelpfully short, I found that, in reality, there is a lot to be thankful for nearly every day.

How easy do you find it to be thankful? How often do you consciously sit down and take the time to count your blessings? Not that we are being particularly and conspicuously ungrateful, but that we are in danger of taking a number of things in our lives for granted, or people for granted, and that is not good. We, each one of us here today, even in the midst of difficult, painful, sad times, can find reasons to be thankful.

Reading the passage from Luke's Gospel, I wonder what kind of week Jesus had been through? Five little words right at the beginning of the passage hint at something most of us would not notice. "On the way to Jerusalem..." He was on the way to the end of His life. If He

didn't know what lay ahead of Him, we, with the benefit of hindsight, do. If He **did** know what lay ahead, and there's reason to believe that He did, what a way to start the week. Having dealt with His squabbling disciples, Jesus is on the way to Calvary, and all that that meant. It's no surprise it's there, and it's no surprise that it's followed with this passage where Jesus heals the separation and brokenness of the human condition by reaching out to people condemned to the fringes of life because they were social and health outcasts. And that led to resounding praise and thanksgiving, just as after the darkness of cross and Calvary, Easter also dawned to resounding praise and thanksgiving.

Jesus is in the region between Samaria and Galilee – it's a dangerous location. Devout Jews did not go anywhere near Samaria or Samaritans. The Samaritans were a despised group, culturally inferior, theological and liturgical heretics. But it is to people like these that we find Jesus drawn towards again and again. Good news and hope and salvation and blessing are not only for the shiny white people, they are for every hopeful and hopeless child of God, wherever they have come from, whoever they might be. Jew, Samaritan, Greek, Roman, European, African, believer, doubter. From the heart of God Jesus persistently, unsettlingly, annoyingly, determinedly goes to the edge, to find where hurting people might have hidden themselves away from respectable society. And when He finds them, He welcomes them, listens to them, talks to them, heals them, and saves them.

The disease of leprosy features frequently in the Bible, and in the ministry of Jesus. Leprosy is a disease that destroys the body's nervous system. Leprosy causes your whole body to go numb. When someone is blind, they cannot see; when someone is deaf, they cannot hear; when someone has leprosy, they cannot feel. Lepers do not die from leprosy, but to the damage that is done to their bodies because they can have cuts, but not feel them, be burned and not feel it, be frozen, and not feel that either. Imagine living a life without feeling.

Seen as unclean and dangerously contagious, lepers were pushed to the edges of communities. "People with leprosy lived in total isolation: banished from their homes, from the loving touch of spouses, children, parents, from the faith community – so feared that even to

cross the shadow of one with leprosy was to risk infection. They lived alone, away from the community. Sometimes they banded together to become a small company of misery.ⁱ But Jesus went near them, and when they knew Who He was, and had somehow heard that He had power to heal and include, they called out to Him from a distance. “A characteristic of Jesus’ ministry is His willingness to be interrupted by the intrusion of human need, offering an example for those who wish to follow Him.”ⁱⁱ

Jesus had mercy on them. Luke provides no description of the physical healing. Simply Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priests (which indicates they were Jews), and their healing would be complete. On their way, the lepers are made clean. Nine keep right on walking, running, skipping, Can you imagine their joy, their relief. Life would be normal again.

But one, not a Jew but a Samaritan, stops in his tracks, runs back to find Jesus, falls on his face at Jesus’ feet, and thanks Him. The outsider, the racially different one, the double, treble outcast, is the one who remembers to say thank you. Jesus is uninterested in the Samaritan’s religion. We know nothing of the man’s theology, or moral values, or politics, or lifestyle choices. All that we really know about him is that he recognised the gift of healing when he saw it and experienced it, and that he returned to say ‘Thank you.’ The least likely person becomes the greatest example of faith. Being grateful and saying thank you are absolutely at the heart of God’s hope for the human race and God’s intent for each of us.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is in this story, like every healing story, a pastoral land mine that we must recognise. Healing takes place here, and for some that can feel like salt rubbed in the wounds of those who are ill and have desperately prayed for health, to no avail. A healing occurs in this story, but something greater also occurs: there is a healed relationship between the Samaritan leper and God, which is expressed in thanksgiving and praise. It’s not the Samaritan’s faith that has ultimately healed here; it is God. Faith is sometimes about learning to deal with what we **don’t** get, as much as what we **do** get, and still, despite everything, be thankful. This leper’s physical healing does not remove his status as a Samaritan and foreigner, or his social and religious isolation. But he is enabled to come close to God because, in the suffering and isolation, God in

Jesus has come close to him. The leper is not ignored and shunned, God in Jesus notices and comes near, and it is also for this that he is thankful.

Through the good times and the bad times in life, how thankful are you? Do you still, despite everything, express gratitude? Someone said to me a few weeks ago after a particularly long list of intimations of gratitude, “Don’t you ever get tired of saying thank you?” I have learned that to be thankful is the right thing to be. And to mean it when you say, ‘thank you’, matters more than many things.

“Boost your health with a dose of gratitude” was the title of a Web launch by a medical group. The essay cited thousands of years of philosophic and religious teaching urging gratitude and then cited new evidence that grateful people, for whom gratitude is a permanent trait, have a health edge. It may be that grateful people take better care of themselves, but there is evidence that gratitude alone is a stress reducer, that grateful people are more hopeful, and that there are links between gratitude and the immune system...

A Christian writer says her two favourite prayers are, in the morning, “Help me. Help me. Help me,” and at bedtime, “Thank You. Thank You. Thank You.” We’re going to pray in a moment. There might be a little silence. There’s something you might be able to say quietly to yourself. In your good times, or your bad times, what, today, are you grateful for, and have you remembered to say thank you to God, and to those around you, who continue to bring you hope and blessing.

“Help me. Help me. Help me.” “Thank You. Thank You. Thank You.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ John M Buchanan, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4, p167

ⁱⁱ Beverly Zink-Sawyer, Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 2, p118

ⁱⁱⁱ Buchanan, *ibid*, p169