

Saying thank you

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

A great theologian was fond of saying that the basic human response to God is gratitude. Not fear and trembling, not guilt and dread, but thanksgiving. "What else can we say to what God gives us but stammer praise?"ⁱ

C S Lewis, the Christian writer and author of the Narnia stories, noted how the Bible, but particularly the Psalms, insist that we praise and thank God. He also observed the connection between gratitude and personal well-being. "I noticed how the humblest and at the same time most balanced minds praised most: while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praised least. Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible."ⁱⁱ

One of the things that seems to me to be important about saying thank you is that, as well as good manners, it draws you out of yourself in order that you consider others. To be thankful, to show gratitude, is the diametric opposite of being self-absorbed and inward-looking. To say thank you, to someone, or for something, has meant that for that moment, you look outwards. You take into consideration a world that is more than simply focussed on you. Saying thank you reminds us that there is more to the world than just 'me, myself, I.' It is also often a reminder that in this world, we are more dependent on others than we realise, or might care to appreciate.

That's quite a correction to the self-regarding, self-gratifying world in which we live and whose ethos we too often absorb. When we reduce the world to what we are interested in, when we immerse ourselves in our own particular echo-chambers of opinion, belief, politics, lifestyle, then we lose sight of the broad and sometimes disconcerting variety and complexity that is our world, and the humanity within it.

In the story about the ten lepers, there are so many rich layers of interest for us to think about. First of all, Jesus is on the move. He is on the way to Jerusalem, the place of crucifixion, the place of resurrection. There are times when Jesus is still, but here He is moving. People of faith, grateful people of faith, are often on the move.

Jesus is also in the region between Samaria and Galilee. It's almost a no-man's-land. Lepers often positioned themselves near routes to make their appeals for charity. But this is country away from safe Jewish ways. Samaritans were to the people of Israel enemies, heretics, dangerous, culturally inferior, despised. Jesus, on the margins yet again, meets marginal people – lepers – in a marginal location – on the road between Samaria and Galilee. And it is the leprous outsider who remembers to do the decent thing and say thank you, but also is the one who recognises Who Jesus really is. He praised God, he bowed down before Jesus, he said thank you.

This isn't really a story just about healing, despite the part it plays. It has something to do with a person on the fringes of life recognising who Jesus is and coming back to say thank you.

I wonder what that says to us today? It's too easy to point the finger at the nine who were also healed but didn't return. They simply did what Jesus said, they were obedient and went to the priest. But the one who came back went a little bit further. He did what he was asked to do by Jesus, but he returned to say thank you. He looked beyond himself and his own healing, to come back and look at Jesus, and see Jesus for what He had done and Who He was.

It is often the stranger in church who sings heartily the hymns we have long left to the choir, or are too polite to sing too loudly, whether our voices are good or not. It is often the stranger in church who expresses thanks for the blessings we no longer notice or take for granted. It is often the stranger in church who will say, "I wasn't expecting to be like this, I actually enjoyed myself." That's maybe a bit of a mixed blessing to be honest! It is often the stranger in church who listens

more attentively to sermons and prayers because we, the regulars, have become too familiar with the words, the phrases, the ideas, we've heard it all before.

Or have we?

Has familiarity bred if not contempt, then at least indifference. It's not that we lack faith, it's that somehow, we've dialled down the response it should evoke. To have faith is to live it, and to live it is to give thanks. It is living a life of gratitude that constitutes living a life of faith. This is the grateful sort of faith that has made the leper from Samaria truly and deeply well.ⁱⁱⁱ He didn't deserve healing. He didn't earn healing. But when healing came, when he recognised the healer in Jesus, he came back to say thank you. He looked beyond his illness, his leprosy, his being outcast from family and friends and society. He looked not inwards but outwards. And standing there on the margin of so many things, there was Jesus, reaching out, ready to see them. That's powerful in itself, Jesus "saw them". That's the faith that made the Samaritan leper well. That's the faith that led him to thankfulness. Jesus saw him. He saw Jesus. In the seeing, and the believing, and the obeying and in the returning, healing came. And that led to saying thank you.

I wonder, is it the case that faith and gratitude are two words for the same thing? To practice gratitude is to practice faith. If faith is not something we have, but something we do, something we live, then how we live will show to the outside world what we believe on the inside. I wonder if it is the case that when we show our gratitude that we find that the faith comes? I wonder that when we look outwards, away from ourselves, not that we see a world through cheery, rose-tinted glasses, far from it, but we see that despite the clouds and the hurt and the fear, there are things to be thankful for, because there are things that we can do, and can be?

I know that looking back on this last week I don't know that I have been particularly faith-full because I have not been particularly thank-full. There have been situations, events, meetings,

where my focus has been inward looking, on getting the things done that I wanted to get done, on shaping the things that I wanted to shape, on thinking a little too much about what I needed, and what was bothering me. Listening to sermons can sometimes be a little bit like eavesdropping into the preacher's life.

But I venture to suggest that if that has been true for me, I wonder how much of that may have been true for you? Looking inward, and maybe with good reason, and what was going on in and around your life has maybe deflected you from looking outward to where help was needed, or light was to be found, or God was present, and I, and you, simply didn't see it. Because our eyes were looking inward, and our heads were facing downward.

Being thankful, as it was for the Samaritan leper, involved a turning around, and a seeing Jesus, and a being faithful, and a saying thank you. When that Samaritan leper lowered himself in praise and thanks before Jesus, Jesus said, "Get up and go on your way. Your faith (and your gratitude) has made you well."

Being faithful, and being thankful, is about getting up, and it may well be that in that getting up, the hand of Jesus reaches out to lift us. To lift you. To lift me.

Does that speak to you, forced to look in because of the darkness of the world, or the pain in your life, or the burdens you are carrying?

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."^{iv} Try it, right now, and tonight before you go to sleep. And maybe you too will find Jesus at the margins of your life, coming closer. With healing. With hope. With mercy. With love.

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

Amen

ⁱ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics p564

ⁱⁱ C S Lewis, Reflection on the Psalms, pps78-81

ⁱⁱⁱ Kimberley Bracken Long, Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol 4, p166

^{iv} Anne Lamott in John Buchanan, Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol 4 p169