

## Sermon 8 September 2019 Gratitude

### Psalm 138:1-6 Luke 17:11-19

Not a week goes by when we don't read or hear about some tragedy or tragedies taking place somewhere around the world. It could be a mass shooting in America (when will they ever learn that their mantra that 'it is people who pull the trigger so it is people who are at fault rather than the guns themselves' is so deeply flawed because it is the guns that make it possible for people to kill in a way that no other easily accessible weapon can?). *For me it is a no-brainer, but then I am not American!* Or it could be a flood of Biblical proportions, an earthquake or just the dastardly deeds of some cruel and power-hungry despot.

When we read about these events we are invariably assailed by a range of emotions, swinging between horror, sadness and helplessness. One of the feelings I often have is one of gratitude. Now obviously I don't feel grateful for what has happened to the victims of these tragedies, but rather it is gratitude for the life I have, and which is highlighted by events such as these. In other words, events such as these make me so very aware of the good fortune and blessings I enjoy in my life.

I think gratitude is partly responsible for the response we make to these tragedies. In recognising what we have and being extremely grateful that not only have we been spared from such tragedy but also that we enjoy the life we do, we feel compelled to express that gratitude by responding through giving in different ways to those affected by these disasters. Sometimes we do not realise how much we have to be grateful for until it is threatened.

But gratitude is something we should all practise as a matter of course, whether what we have is threatened or not. I believe that in not acknowledging a gift, no matter what that gift might be, and whether it has come from God or someone on a slightly more humble plane than God, we are exhibiting a selfish spirit. John Ortberg, well-known author and pastor of a large Presbyterian church in California said, '*Gratitude liberates us from the prison of preoccupation.*'

Our gospel reading relates how ten lepers were healed by Jesus. Lepers were commanded to wear torn clothes, let their hair grow unkempt and cry, '*Unclean, unclean,*' lest anyone should have accidental contact with them. So these lepers stood at a distance and yelled, '*Jesus, have pity on us.*' Maybe

they were hoping for a miracle, maybe they were just hoping for some money or a little food.

Jesus was moved by their plight. He told them to go and show themselves to the priests. They left him and something happened to their broken bodies. As they went, they were healed. They took off, ecstatic, joyful. But one returned, only one. He threw himself at Jesus's feet in gratitude.

Last week we talked about humility. Gratitude is always an act of humility. David makes this point in Psalm 138. Having bowed down before God and giving thanks, he says, *'Though the Lord is great, he cares for the humble.'* Verse 6.

When members of the Masai tribe of West Africa express thanks, they put their foreheads on the ground and say, *'My head is in the dirt.'* Members of another tribe express their gratitude by sitting for a long while in front of the person to whom they are indebted and then say, *'I sit on the ground before you.'* So very simple but so very humble and a gesture that carries great meaning.

So ten lepers were cleansed. Ten men were given their life back, but only one returned to give thanks, and what's more, he was a Samaritan. As a Samaritan he was socially and culturally removed from Jesus, never mind his leprosy, which makes his expression of gratitude even more remarkable.

All too often we take good fortune for granted, we take acts of kindness for granted. We don't appreciate or acknowledge the kindness behind a gesture.

*There is the story of a desert wanderer who discovered a spring of cool, crystal-clear water. It tasted so good, he filled a leather container with the precious liquid so he could bring it to the king. After a long journey, he presented his gift to the king, who drank it with pleasure and lavishly thanked the wanderer, who went away with a happy heart.*

*The king's son tasted the water and spat it out. It had become contaminated by the old leather canteen and had become foul. The son asked his father why he pretended to like the awful-tasting water.*

*The king said, 'Son, that man gave me a gift from his heart. It wasn't the water I enjoyed, it was the sweet taste of his generosity. When someone gives you something with genuine love, the thing is simply the container. The real gift is the thought inside.'*

We need to recognise generosity of spirit and more importantly, to acknowledge it. We need to have a deep sense of gratitude for everything we receive in life. Marcus Tullius Cicero, Roman philosopher, said, *'Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, it is the parent of all others.'*

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