

17th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 23, Year C)

Luke 17.11-19

St Luke's, Chelsea

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“Now what do you say?” I wonder, when you were a child, if your parents used to use the same words. The occasion would usually be something like this: a distant relative has just given you the Christmas jumper you never knew you wanted, and is sitting there beaming and waiting for a response. And of course the correct answer is not ‘should’a gone to Specsavers’ or ‘you shouldn’t have’, but ‘thank you’. So that is just what I learned to say: ‘thank you’.

By the time we reach adulthood we have learned that it’s important to say thank you. We’ll say it when we deeply mean it; we’ll say it as a point of courtesy; and sometimes, if we’re feeling very British, we’ll say it to be polite even if the other person has in fact deeply inconvenienced us. But it’s at this point that, I think, today’s gospel reading presses on us. It is one thing to say thank you. How, I want to ponder today, does it change us to be people who really know, at the deepest level of our beings, what it is to say thank you?

It’s a simple but memorable story from Luke’s gospel that offers us this chance to think about gratitude. As Jesus enters a village, he is approached by ten lepers. Here are the archetypal outcasts of the Bible. We may come across many figures in the gospels who are not welcome in polite society – women with bleeding; those with demons; tax collectors. But it is only lepers who, in obedience to the laws laid down in the Torah, have to remain away from places where people live, must wear torn clothes and let the hair of their head be dishevelled, and must shout ‘unclean; unclean’ when anyone is near.¹ They can’t move about the town; they can’t even be beggars at the town gate. They are outcasts.

¹ Leviticus 13.45-46; cf also Number 5.2-3

So when they see Jesus passing by we can imagine their desperation. 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' they cry. And we can imagine too Jesus stopping, and turning towards them, and being filled with compassion and love for this group of ten people whose lives, homes, families, have been torn apart by this dreadful disease. And yet rather than touching them, or simply saying 'you are healed', as Jesus does at other points, he says to the ten, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And since the priests were based in Jerusalem we may imagine the ten setting out on quite a trek from their Galilean borderlands. But on the way – I like to imagine each waking up one morning in a cold makeshift roadside camp to discover their skin miraculously smooth and unblemished again – the ten are healed of their leprosy.

All ten are healed. But nine of them simply go off rejoicing, back to their families or off to the inn I presume. Only one makes the trek back to Jesus, falls at his feet, and thanks him. What's more, Luke adds, the one who came back to give thanks was not an Israelite, as we may presume the other nine were. He was a Samaritan, an outcast therefore for two reasons. Seeing only the one returned, Jesus's response is one of surprise, perhaps of sadness. But his final words to the Samaritan are the one Luke wants us to remember: 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'

All ten lepers are, as Luke tells it, healed. But only one is saved. This is the leper who sees what has happened, and realises its significance. He knows that this healing can only be an act of God.

A few chapters earlier, Luke has told the story of the Good Samaritan. This is a parable about the importance of love in action: it is the foreigner, and not the priest or the Levite, who acts as a true neighbour. Now Luke tells a story about another Samaritan. But this time, it is a story about the importance of faith. All ten lepers had enough faith to walk away from Jesus and head towards the priest. Only one has faith that is so whole and deep that it gives rise to gratitude when he realises what has happened.

All ten are healed. One, says Jesus, has faith that has 'made [him] well'.

And it is this deep thankfulness – this 'attitude of gratitude' – that is a life's work to develop. The work of thankfulness that our parents begin to form in us as children is something we can turn away from, or can choose to accept and enjoy.

When someone holds open a door for me, 'thank you' is not just a transactional return for what has been done, but a recognition that I depend on others for the daily life I enjoy.

When someone buys me a coffee unbidden, 'thank you' is a celebration of the gifts we sometimes enjoy with no expectation of a return.

When I spot something beautiful around me; or experience the kindness of a stranger; or spend time with those who work like Jesus to bring healing to those around them: 'thank you' to God is an acknowledgement of the deep roots, amidst the darker things of this life, of all the good we have around us.

And when someone says 'thank you' to me, what, I might ask, is a response that accepts this dependence, enjoyment, acknowledgement of the good in me?² Surely not 'don't mention it', as if the person shouldn't have bothered; or 'the pleasure is all mine', which undermines the gratitude of the other person; or 'not at all', which implies that saying thank you is just wrong. I could offer 'you're welcome'; you might say something different. Either way, we do well to recognise the shared pleasure and hospitality in the moment, whether it's a passing moment in a doorway or during another stay with a childhood friend.

Saying thank you shapes us. Receiving the thanks of others shapes us. We are being shaped to be people of God, people who are truly saved.

In the gratitude of the Samaritan leper we have a reminder of the importance of being truly grateful. And indeed, we might add, we

² The sentences that follow are inspired by the opening of Sam Wells's 2007 sermon, 'The power of saying thank you'.

are reminded that it is sometimes the outcasts – those with next to nothing – who find it easier to be grateful for the little they have, than those of us who have been blessed with much.

So perhaps I can end with one little story about what it might look like to see glory even in the midst of what might look like horror.³ Martin Rinkart became the pastor of the small German town of Eilenberg in 1618 just as the slaughter and chaos of the Thirty Years War was beginning. This was a period so catastrophic that the population of Germany fell from 16 million to 6 million over thirty years. Eilenberg was a walled city. It became a crowded haven for political and military refugees. This left the city vulnerable to disease and famine. In the year 1637 there was terrible plague. Martin Rinkart was the only pastor remaining in Eilenberg. He conducted 4000 funerals in that year, including up to 50 funerals a day. Rinkart lost half his household, including his wife. We might have understood if he felt resentful, angry and unforgiving. But instead, as the tide of slaughter, famine and plague began to recede, he sat down and wrote one of the most famous hymns in the German language, *Nun danket alle Gott*. We know it now in English as “Now thank we all our God”. Rinkart saw the wreckage of war, the folly of his fellow human beings, and the pain visited on so many around him. But he at the same time saw still the ultimate grace of God, which had given him life, had given him hope, and still gave him faith. Like the Samaritan leper he responded in the way he had been shaped over a lifetime. He said thank you.

It’s difficult to imagine what it might have meant for Martin Rinkart to be healed. But it’s hard to doubt that he was saved. So too was the Samaritan. And so too may we keep learning to give and receive thanks each day, that we too become people in whom the glory of God is revealed.

³ The same Sam Wells sermon ends with this story; I draw heavily on his telling here.