

Address by Bill Pattinson 9 October 2022 at St David's Church

Luke 7:11-19 The Healing of the Ten Lepers; 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c The Healing of Naaman

"I just can't watch the news on TV anymore - it's always so depressing." This was a recent comment from one of my golf colleagues....and this before we'd hit a single ball. National and international events do indeed make uneasy watching at the moment - cost of living crisis, war in Ukraine, disasters in Pakistan and America, famine and drought in Africa, unrest in Iran and Russia, financial market instability, dangerous and powerful dictators..... and we haven't even touched on our own or others' personal sorrows and anxieties. How do we sustain our faith in a loving, caring God under such threatening and frightening circumstances? What on earth is there in the world for which we can say, "Thank you."?

One amazing moment of gratitude stood out for me in the recent news. Following the court case, which was looking into the death of Molly Russell in November 2017, Molly's father, Ian, gave a simple, yet heartfelt tribute to her saying, "Molly, thank you for being my daughter." I mean how often do we say "thank you" to our sons or daughters for simply being who they are. And this, in circumstances, where the coroner had said that Molly had died from an act of self-harm while suffering from "depression and the negative effects of online content". Sometimes we don't know how much we need to give thanks for our blessings until we lose someone precious or when something we value greatly is taken away from us. There was certainly an outpouring of thanks for the queen, when she died. Gratitude, I think, is one of the noblest of emotions and too often undervalued.

There are two important themes in this morning's Gospel, which are replicated in the Old Testament reading concerning Naaman, the Syrian. The first, and more obvious theme, is that the appropriate response to Jesus is one of faithful recognition and gratitude. Only one of the ten cleansed lepers responded fully and appropriately. Naaman also did so after his healing, but only after prompting. The other theme is Jesus' care for the marginalised. In this case his care for ten lepers, the outcasts and unlovely of society in Jewish Palestine at that time. At least one of the lepers, the one who returned to Jesus to give thanks, was doubly marginalised

for he was a foreigner, Jesus' word, a Samaritan. In the same way, Naaman, a great army commander for the king of Aram, suffered from leprosy and was a foreigner, a Syrian. It is not unusual for these two themes to occur together in Luke's Gospel. The marginalised seem well placed to see Jesus for who he is, just as he has seen them for who they are. Let's explore these two themes more fully.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, travelling in the region between Samaria and Galilee. This geographical boundary region was tough terrain, sparsely populated by the occasional village, a perfect area for lepers to live, thrown out of society as they were. Jesus is now about to cross societal boundaries by his association with lepers and Samaritans. Ten lepers approach Jesus and, keeping their distance, they cried out for mercy. They had perhaps recognised Jesus and had heard of his reputation. Notice they do not ask for healing. The outcast lepers of those days were fed, watered and clothed by the generosity of others. Jesus says to them, "Go and show yourself to the priests." It was the responsibility of the priests to acknowledge full healing of the horrible disease so that they might return to normal society. It is as they went to the priests that they were healed and cleansed. What joy that must have been.

Joy, perhaps, yet only one of the ten returned to seek out Jesus when he realised he had been healed. He praised God with a loud voice, threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. This word "thank" is the one used when Jesus thanks God for the bread and cup at the last supper. The basis for our thanksgiving, the Eucharist.

So, you may ask, what about the other nine? Well no doubt they would have made excuses for not thanking Jesus. After all, they were only human. Perhaps it went like this:

- .One waited to see if the cure was real
- .One waited to see if it would last
- .One said he would see Jesus later
- .One decided that he had never had leprosy
- .One said he would have got well anyway
- .One gave the glory to the priests
- ".One said, "O, well, Jesus didn't really do anything
- ".One said, "Any rabbi could have done it
- ".One said, "I was already getting better anyway

How often do we give thanks for the source of our good health, our healing and our being anyway? How easy it is, like the other nine, to make excuses not to say “thank you”. “Were not ten made clean”, asks Jesus. “But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner.”

Now this foreigner was a Samaritan. At the time of Jesus, there was a fierce and long standing enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans. Jews had no dealings with Samaritans and vice versa. Although geographical neighbours, they avoided entering each other’s territory often taking large detours to reach a destination. But so often, it is not the person from the radically different culture on the other side of the world that is hardest to love, but the nearby neighbour whose skin colour, rituals, values, ancestry, history and customs are different from one’s own. There is something in this miracle to be understood about the people who live at the margins of our communities, who are treated in an unloving, invisible way because of how they look or who they are or where they come from. Our prejudices can lead us to treat others as the Jews treated the Samaritans. Who are these people today?

Whoever they are Jesus clearly notices and loves them and he calls us to do the same. It was sometimes difficult for Jesus’ disciples to accept the welcoming ways of Jesus and it can also be difficult for ourselves today to accept the inclusive belief that “All are welcome” in God’s kingdom.

Jesus’ final words to the thankful, cleansed leper are, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” The word for “get up” is a word early Christians would have recognised as linked to “resurrection”. Like the prodigal son this man “was dead and is alive again.” And it so often is, in Jesus’ miracles, that faith and healing go hand in hand. Tom Wright says: “The rhythm of faith and gratitude is what being a Christian is all about.”

Thus, despite the difficult times, or should it be, because of the difficult times, and despite the difficult people, or should it be, because of the difficult people, we must keep faith and joyfully offer grateful thanks to God:

We thank him for the truth behind appearance

We thank him for his light in every face

We thank him for us all, with every breath