

The Grace of Gratitude

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Date: 15 November 1998

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the service at Holy Trinity on the 15th of November 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled The Grace of Gratitude and is from Deuteronomy chapter 26 verses 1 to 15. I want to keep that passage open from Deuteronomy chapter 26 in front of you. At one level it's fairly easy to give thanks to God.

Many of us without much hesitation could list all sorts of things we want to thank God for. For family, for jobs, for health, for holidays, for a sunny day yesterday and a bit of rain today and so on. But at another level it's almost impossible for some people to give thanks to God. For some people life is just full of a mixture of good and bad and there's no thanking God for the good even if occasionally there's some praying to get rid of the bad.

[1 : 10] Some people pray in a crisis but rarely do they give thanks to God when the crisis is resolved. There's the story of the Christian about to be put to death in the lion's ring in ancient Rome.

He prayed that the lion would be a Christian lion and sure enough when the lion approached him the lion said, Lord make me thankful for what I'm about to receive. It's an interesting prayer that we pray, isn't it?

Lord make me thankful for what we're about to receive. It seems to suggest that there's some difficulty with being thankful to God as though somehow we need God's help to make us thankful. And I think for many of us that is true. Being thankful to God is not easy. Indeed, I think it would be true to say that thankfulness to God is a distinctively Christian thing to do.

In other religions there is little or no thankfulness to their so-called gods. A friend of mine grew up with a father who was hard to please.

[2 : 25] A fairly remote and a loose father. He wasn't a generous father and it seemed that for most of my friend's life as a child he could hardly do anything right to win his father's favour.

As soon as my friend in his teenage years got one of those part-time jobs in a shop or paper round or whatever it was his father presented him with an account of everything that he had given my friend since he was about five years old.

It's a sad story, isn't it?

Although it's probably not all that uncommon in some respects. But for many religions that's the sort of relationship people have with their God.

They don't ever receive gifts from their God. All they ever get are what they earn. In order to get their God's favour they have in some way to pay for it or earn it.

[3 : 37] But in Christian faith it's different. In Christian faith Christians are thankful to their God because God is a giving God.

Not a God who asks us to earn his favour but a God who generously and graciously gives us gifts that we do not deserve at all.

There is a world of difference between what we earn and what we get freely given. And when each month a treasurer gives me my pay slip I don't jump up and down with joy and say thank you for being so kind and generous this is totally unexpected I'm pretty pleased and I go to the bank and bank it but there's a sense in which I've, I hope, earned what I'm being paid.

Very different to if we'd been given the same sort of cheque for something that we hadn't done.

Then we would be full of thankfulness and gratitude for something that we do not deserve and did not earn.

That difference is the difference between many religions if not most and Christian faith. Because the Christian God is a God who gives gives generously and gives to us when we do not deserve it.

[4 : 53] In the passage that was read to us and for many of us it's probably a fairly obscure passage from the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament the people of Israel are about to enter the promised land.

It had been promised to them 600 years before to a man called Abraham and yet for 600 years they'd not lived there. For the last 400 of those years they'd lived in Egypt and for the last part of that in slavery in Egypt.

But now through various events and under a leader called Moses the people have come to the edge of the Jordan River about to cross into the promised land. And in this chapter that was read to us there are instructions about the very first religious service that is to be conducted in the land. And six times in just 11 verses the instruction says when you cross over into the land that the Lord your God is giving you not the land you will conquer or the land that you deserve or the land that if you're good enough I'll give to you but the land that God is freely giving to the people of Israel. They don't earn it through their conquest or their righteousness or their goodness or in their giving to God. It is a land freely given to them.

[6 : 14] And it's a good land it's a land flowing with milk and honey it's a land that is full of bounty that they are to offer back to God once they're in it. Why does God give them this land?

Not because they deserve it but because inexplicably God had promised that land to the descendants of Abraham 600 years before.

That's why in the middle of the passage that was read to us they are to recite a statement of their past history. A wandering Aramean was my father Abraham and Jacob being referred to. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham. And they went down to Egypt and they lived there and so on but then we came into slavery and we cried out to God and he answered our prayers. And he answered the prayers because he promised things to his people.

God is keeping his promise here. And so God brought us out of Egypt through miraculous signs and wonders the parting of the Red Sea and so on and for 40 years through the desert now to the edge of the promised land.

[7 : 16] All of that's recounted in an earlier book in the Old Testament called the Book of Exodus. The theological word that describes what all of this is about is a simple word that we know well.

It's the word grace. Not the action of a beautiful ballerina. Grace is the generous giving of a God who is gracious.

He gives to those who do not deserve to receive. And there was nothing in the people of Israel that warranted this land or warranted God's favour or warranted his promise or his goodness.

It was freely given by a gracious God. Now what's all this got to do with us? Two, three and a half thousand years later. Far from that land and for many of us we've never been there and never will go there.

The point is this. This land was a prototype, if you like or a model of what heaven ought to be like. It was meant to be paradise on earth.

[8 : 23] It was meant to be full of every good thing and no bad thing that could exist although it all went wrong in the end. It was meant to be what heaven's like. Paradise.

Peace. Perfection. Prosperity and abundance and bounty of the land. For Christians that is just the prototype.

The real thing is what Jesus promises us. A heavenly land. A heavenly inheritance. The same word that's used of the land of ancient Israel. A real paradise untainted by evil or sin or badness in any way.

And precisely the same means by which ancient Israel was to receive this land applies for Christian people today in heaven. In the Old Testament the land was promised.

It was given to them through redemption or freedom and then they were given that land. and the same applies for heaven for us. It's promised to Christian people.

[9 : 24] Not only to the promises to Abraham but what Jesus repeated as well. it is also ours for redemption or salvation or freedom. It is also ours not freedom from Egypt and slavery but rather freedom from sin our own evil and the evil of this world.

Not freed through parting of the waters of the Red Sea so that they can exit Egypt and enter into the promised land but rather through the death of Jesus Christ to bring us freedom from sin and evil.

And the entry into the land for ancient Israel was an entry in the end by faith. It was God who would conquer the land. All Israel had to do was trust and believe.

And the same applies to Christians today. The conquest is achieved by Jesus' death on the cross. our response is to trust and believe and thus be assured of entry into God's heaven forever. Entry into heaven like entry into ancient Israel was to be done by faith receiving God's gift of grace. It's not payment for what we earn or deserve.

[10 : 39] It's not a payment for our goodness in this life but a free gift by a gracious God. In other religions there is little to give thanks to their gods for but rather lots to give in order to appease their anger or win their favour.

But in Christian faith from beginning to end Christians are to be abundantly thankful to a gracious and giving God.

When Israel entered the land they were instructed in this passage to offer a sacrifice not a sacrifice to appease their gods' anger but a sacrifice of thanksgiving for the favour that he had initiated with them.

They were to give their first fruits at the harvest not just what's left over at the end the surplus when their barns and bellies are full but rather the first the best the prime choice was to be given to their god.

That says something about priority in giving to god that probably puts many of us to shame. They weren't to come to offer their sacrifice from whatever is left over but rather their first and their set aside for god.

[11 : 58] But not only that set aside as a token for all the rest. It wasn't just that they would give their first fruits and their tithes or ten percents of what they had achieved or earned to god and then go and greedily gobble up the rest but rather what they gave to god was to be symbolic or a token for the giving of everything back to god because they recognised that all came from god in the first place and all of life was to be lived for him.

So the same ought to apply for us as well. Our giving as act of thanksgiving to god must be generous. It must be a priority giving of our first and our best to a gracious god.

It must also be representative of everything. There's no point coming and giving generously in the collection plate and then going away and living the rest of our lives selfishly for ourselves but rather our generous giving to god and his purposes say through the church collection is to be symbolic of our whole lives being lived for the glory of god and in thanksgiving to him.

Grateful giving you see is grounded in grace and if we do not appreciate a god of grace then our giving will never be generous nor grateful in response to him.

when Christians give reluctantly or stingily back to god not only in the collections that are taken up but in general ways of life then it betrays a wrong god that is being worshipped.

[13 : 44] For many people they view a god who is not a generous giver but somehow they need to win his favour our giving to that god will never be generous and never be grateful but Christian faith is centred on the lord Jesus Christ because he is grace personified he is god's indescribable gift that is given for us so that we may be released from slavery into sin and evil in this world liberated and set free to enter into god's perfect paradise of heaven freely given for us for that purpose if the story of Jesus death does not stir your hearts to gratitude to god then you need to think again about the god that you conceive of because he's not the god of the bible there's a song that we sometimes sing and I wonder whether these words could be said or sung sincerely by you

I am a new creation no more in condemnation but here in the grace of god I stand my heart is overflowing my love just keeps on growing here in the grace of god I stand and I will praise you lord yes I will praise you I'll sing of all that you have done a joy that knows no limit here in the grace of god I stand when we worship the god of the bible the generous and giving god personified in Jesus Christ his son then our character will be shaped by his our giving will be shaped by his our hearts responding in thankfulness will be shaped by his character and gift generously given then and only then will we exercise grateful giving grounded in grace let's pray our god we thank you for your great goodness and generosity to us not only in the daily things of this life in the providence of health and family and friends and jobs and so on but in the eternal things that the death and resurrection of your son Jesus Christ have won for us we thank you our god from the bottom of our hearts for all that is ours that we could not earn but yet in your mercy you give to us we pray that our gifts made today in offerings in pledges of faith in children being baptized will be tokens of whole lives lived in thankfulness to you and your grace we pray this in Jesus name amen may may are here may