

# Thanksgiving

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[ 0 : 0 0 ] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 29th of October 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker and his sermon is entitled Thanksgiving.

Gwyneth Paltrow did it at the Oscars a couple of years ago. Geoff Kennett did it after the state election last year. Michael Knight did it at the Olympic closing ceremony.

In fact, there seems to be a growing trend to do it and a growing art in how to do it. That is, giving thanks to family, friends and supporters in public.

My sister has been nominated for a Walkley Award in journalism and I've told her that I expect her victory speech to include profuse thanks for her brother.

Public expressions of thanks vary. Some of them are sincerely self-effacing, humble in their victory.

[ 1 : 1 7 ] For example, I think Michael Diamond was like that when he won the gold medal in shooting at the Olympics. Some speeches of thanks are really just doing the right thing, following the right etiquette or protocol.

Sometimes, for example, a groom at a wedding or the captain of a team that wins or something like that. Sometimes, expressions of thanks are really a facade for self-importance and self-aggrandisement.

How wonderful I am and thank you for making me so wonderful sort of speeches. The same sort of categories can apply for Christians in the way we give thanks to God as well.

Sometimes, our expressions of thanks are really just saying the right words at the right time in the right way. A fairly trite performance, perhaps.

Sometimes, they can be excuses for self-importance. The Lord has blessed me and what I've done and so on. But sometimes, they can be truly humble and truly self-effacing as they ought to be and as we've seen plenty of examples of this morning already.

[ 2 : 3 7 ] How do we shape up in the way we give thanks to God? Well, in the second reading from Luke 17, Jesus is on his way south to Jerusalem.

He's been in the north of the country for most of his adult ministry in an area called Galilee. He's heading south to Judea. It's like going from Queensland to Victoria.

And in the way, you've got Samaria. Not wishing to make New South Wales quite like Samaria, but trying to give you the geographical locations at least. Most Jews would skirt around Samaria.

They'd go into Jordan or if the Australian geography takes place, I suppose you'd have to go into South Australia and Northern Territory to sort of get down into Victoria without going through Samaria.

At this point, Jesus is on the border between Galilee in the north and Samaria in the south. Maybe he's even walking, in effect, along the border territory so that he doesn't go through Samaria.

[ 3 : 3 2 ] We're not quite sure exactly where he goes next. And as he approaches a village, ten lepers are there shouting out. So we read about that in verse 12.

As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him, keeping their distance. They shout to him because they're unclean and they can't come close to him. Leprosy here is probably general skin-type diseases.

And it would make a person in that society unclean. It would lead to social ostracism. They would be kicked out, in effect, of the village outside the gate or the wall and there to live, maybe even scrounge, until their skin disease was cured or healed or had got better of its own accord, in which case they would be, through various rituals, allowed back into society.

So these ten lepers are outside the village and they keep their distance. They're probably a way away from the road or the path into the village. Hence they're crying or shouting out to Jesus so that he can hear them.

And they cry out to him, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. Which certainly seems to imply that the fame of Jesus has spread. They know who he is. Maybe even some crowds are following Jesus as he walks his journey down towards Jerusalem, where in a few weeks' time he will die on the cross. [ 5 : 03 ] They cry out for mercy. It may be that they're simply asking for some charity, like the people who sometimes come to the vicarage door wanting money for some purpose or other.

It may be that their cry for mercy is, in fact, a cry for a miracle to heal us. If the fame of Jesus is so well known, they may know of him as a miracle worker.

And so they're crying out to him, in effect, that Jesus might heal them. The exact intent is unclear. They just say, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.

Jesus' reply to them in verse 14 may seem uncaring. Go and show yourselves to the priests. We could interpret that as though Jesus is rather offhandedly saying, well, go and show yourselves to the priests.

It's as though, I don't want to have anything to do with you. But Jesus is not dismissing them like that. Leprosy made a person ritually unclean.

[ 6 : 06 ] But when a person was recovered from leprosy, the Old Testament tells us what they must do. They must go to a priest and show him or herself to the priest, who acts in this capacity a bit like a health inspector and would declare, if it was in fact the case, that they are now clean.

Their leprosy is healed or they have recovered from it. And only then could a leper resume his or her place in their society. And usually a sacrifice would be made at that point.

It may be that they would have to travel to the temple in order for this to happen. And the details of this are in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. But what that background shows is that probably what's going on here is that Jesus' words are not simply dismissing them saying, go and see a priest.

But rather his words are implying you will be healed. So go and show yourself to a priest who will declare that you are clean, that you are healed, that you are now ready to resume your place in society.

And interestingly, these ten lepers obey. They head off to show themselves to the priests. It may have been that they just can go into the nearby village and see a priest, or maybe they had to go down to the Jerusalem temple itself.

[ 7 : 35 ] We're not quite sure where they would have gone. But somehow they obey Jesus' words and maybe that implies that they actually trust that they will be healed.

On the way, they are healed. We're told at the end of verse 14. And as they went, they were made clean.

It's a miracle. They are cured at a distance. Jesus doesn't touch them to heal them. Not because he doesn't want to touch a leper.

In an earlier case in Luke's Gospel, he touches a leper to heal the leper. But not here. They're cured at a distance. Jesus doesn't even speak a word saying, be healed or be cured.

Just that as they go, in obedience to his command to go, they are made clean. One of them turns back. That is, one of them disobeys Jesus' command to go and show himself to the priests.

[ 8 : 38 ] He decides not to. He turns back to come back to Jesus himself. And so he turned back, praising God with a loud voice, probably so that everybody else could hear that he's been made well and presumably attributing that to Jesus.

He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet. That is, he didn't shout out again to Jesus from a distance as he'd done before with the other nine, but now healed, he can come right up to Jesus' feet and prostrate himself before him.

No longer is he socially alienated because of his leprosy. He's clean and he can come to Jesus' feet. And he lies, presumably in the dusty ground, at Jesus' feet, paying him homage and even worship for the healing that Jesus has brought.

He knows why he's been healed or he knows at least who has healed him and he's come back to pay his respects and thanksgiving. And he thanked him. The only place in the Gospels that anybody thanks Jesus, interestingly, this man thanks Jesus, we're told in verse 16.

But then comes the dramatic punchline. The information's been withheld for a little while so that when we read this story, it has more impact.

[ 10 : 05 ] And he was a Samaritan. Of all the people, the ten people who were healed, the one who came back to Jesus to thank him was a Samaritan.

The implication is the other nine were Jews. The sorts of people you might expect to give thanks and be religiously upright and so on. But the one person who comes back to Jesus to thank him is not a Jew but a Samaritan.

Now the Samaritans and Jews had a long history of hatred and hostility. It went back about 500 years or more. The Samaritans who lived in that middle area of the land of Israel, so to speak, were a mixed race of Jews.

When they were conquered by the Assyrians, they intermarried with other peoples and they lost their, if you like, pure Jewish heritage. And so over the course of history, the Jews despised them and hated them for their looseness of their heritage, for mixed marriages that had led to them being, if you like, just half Jews or less than that.

Great hatred. So much so that, as I've said, Jews would not normally try to walk through Samaria. They would skirt around the outside if they were going from the Jewish Galilee in the north to the Jewish Judea in the south or vice versa.

[ 11 : 31 ] Now Jesus doesn't rebuke this man for coming to him and disobeying the command to go to the priest. In fact, he implicitly applauds and congratulates him for doing the right thing in coming to Jesus.

Here is a man, you see, who's discovered the true source of healing. Here's a man who's double alienation. Alienation because he's a Samaritan and alienation because he's a leper is now over. And here's a man who's truly thankful. See, he doesn't need to go to a priest to have a priest declare him to be healed. He's coming to the one who has the power to heal, not just to declare that healing's happened, but the one who's got the very power to heal leprosy, Jesus himself.

He doesn't need a sacrifice to be offered to mark his re-entry into society as a cleansed man. rather he offers to Jesus a sacrifice of praise.

He doesn't need to go to the temple where the priests were to have some ritual of cleansing. He comes to the living temple, Jesus, as a cleansed man.

[ 12 : 44 ] And he doesn't need to go to the temple or anywhere else to glorify God. But rather he comes to God in person, to Jesus, and glorifies God by paying homage and worship at his feet and thanking him.

praise my soul, the King of Heaven, to his feet thy tribute bring. Here that hymn is illustrated by this thankful cleansed leper.

Jesus responds with three questions. The first two really express indignation that the other nine cleansed lepers have not come back.

He says, were not ten made clean, but the other nine, where are they? The way the question is phrased highlights his indignation, even offence, that he's cleansed ten lepers and only one could be bothered to come back to give thanks for the cleansing.

And the third question Jesus asks in verse 18, highlights the contrast between this one man and the others, the one foreigner as he's described by Jesus here.

[ 14 : 06 ] Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner, this Samaritan? That verse implies something extraordinary.

Jesus equates giving praise to God with thanking Jesus. that is, they haven't really given praise to God by going to show themselves to the priest, maybe at the temple, even singing psalms of praise. They've failed to praise God, Jesus is implying in verse 18. Because to truly give praise to God, they would have come to Jesus to thank him.

Their praise of God is deficient for not coming back to Jesus to thank him. Well, the account finishes with Jesus' words to this Samaritan healed leper, get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well.

Not here meaning your faith has cleansed your leprosy, not meaning just physical healing. He's already been physically healed like the other nine were. Jesus' words to him in verse 19 are singling him out over and above the other nine.

[ 15 : 24 ] So when he says your faith has made you well, Jesus is commending the particular faith of the Samaritan because it's a faith that's expressed in gratitude and thanksgiving.

And when he says has made you well, he's not just referring to physical healing because the other nine were physically healed as well. He's in fact saying salvation, full salvation is yours.

Over and above what those other nine had in physical healing. Now, full salvation is yours in the deepest spiritual sense as well as physical sense.

Well, what do we learn from this on Thanksgiving Day? We will never be able to thank Jesus as we ought if we are unaware of our debt to him.

Here is a man with a double debt, a Samaritan ostracised by the Jews, and a leper, also ostracised. [16:25] He knows all too well what Jesus has done for him. Not only has Jesus healed his leprosy and therefore restored his relationship with his people and the people of God and even with God in a way, but he's also brought him in from afar off as a Samaritan despised and brought him back into a relationship with God in a full sense.

His debt to Jesus is greater than the debt of the other nine who were just healed from leprosy, but they were Jews, not Samaritans. And his awareness of his debt to Jesus makes him thankful in his heart.

And so for us, leprosy is not our problem, probably, but Jesus has done more for us than healing us of some physical ailment.

Though he may well have done that as well. We will not be thankful if we fail to understand the depth of our sin that Jesus has dealt with.

Too often, some strands of modern Christianity belittle sin, sweep it under the carpet, pretend it's not really sin, pretend it's not really bad or wrong.

[17:43] Wherever strands of Christian faith do that, they cut out all the grounds of giving thanks to God for Jesus and his death. Some strands of Christianity seem to imply that Christian faith is really about self-fulfillment.

But where that is the case, again, the grounds of thankfulness to Jesus are undermined. For some, Christianity leads to a sort of religious self-righteousness.

And again, there are little grounds to thank Jesus when we think of ourselves as being religiously self-righteous. Because self-righteousness quenches all reason to give gratitude.

gratitude. For some, Christianity is really an excuse for the power of positive thinking. And again, where that is the error, we end up just losing a reason to give thanks to God for Jesus.

Some Christians think that somehow God owes them one. And if that's the case, there is no reason to give thanks to God for Jesus.

[19:01] Some people think that somehow we deserve salvation, we've earned it, we've contributed to it, we've paid for it somehow. Where that is the case, again, we have no reason to give thanks to God for Jesus.

The truth is different from each of those distortions of Christian faith. The truth is that we are thoroughly indebted to God.

We are like the poorest of the third world countries in chronic debt, unable to change our economy to restore debt.

And even if the G7 and the Jubilee Coalition wipe off our debt, we're still indebted in ways that we can never change. That's like us and God.

God, we can never cancel our own debt to God. He's done more for us than we can ever imagine or ever do. He saved us by Jesus' death, something we could never have done.

[20:06] He's taken away our sins, something we do not deserve, we could never earn. The biblical word for that is grace. We do not deserve or earn what Jesus has done for us.

We are thoroughly indebted to him for it. Salvation is ours, but it's unmerited and undeserved and unearned. We're in debt to God.

God, we're in debt to God for our lives, for our beings, for our futures, for everything. What God has done for us in Jesus is worth more than a life of sacrificial giving and heartfelt praise and thanks.

ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like me his praise should sing. If we don't see ourselves in each of those four categories, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, our praise will be very trite indeed.

But the one who daily feels the debt to his saviour, a debt of grace, daily thanks his Lord from the heart. We see here too one aspect of Christian faith that is essential, not an added extra.

[21:35] Jesus demands our thanks. Christian faith must comprise thanks to Jesus, thanks to God. Thanks is not a sort of icing on the cake, if you like, of Christian faith.

Faith that has weak thanksgiving. Faith that is just thanks in trite form, is deficient faith. Christian faith, proper Christian faith, essentially includes thanksgiving to Jesus and thanksgiving to God.

Jesus is indignant. Jesus is indignant that the nine men have not returned. He commends the leper for coming back. He acknowledges that his faith is complete faith, whereas the faith of the other

nine is in some way deficient for their lack of thanksgiving to Jesus.

Luke records this story, not just because it happened, but he records it as a warning for us. because the person in the story, or the people at least in the story with whom we are meant to identify most probably, are the nine non-returned lepers.

Be not like the nine is in effect the warning of this story. Too many Christians are too ready to pray than praise.

[ 23 : 01 ] Too many Christians, I think, are too ready to ask than thank. Too many Christians are too quick to grumble than be grateful.

Probably we are more disposed to ask God for that which we do not have than to give him thanks for that which we do have. Faith without gratitude or faith without thanksgiving is deficient faith. Jesus' words to the nine absent lepers implies that at least. So if your prayers of thanks to God are trite, they roll off the tongue because it's the right word in the right place, but they don't come from the heart, then maybe it's time to take stock.

And if in the things for which you give God thanks, the primary thing is not Jesus' death and resurrection for you, then again perhaps it's time to take stock.

There are plenty of things to give God thanks. We've heard of some today. It's right to give him thanks for all of those things and more. But chief of the things for which we are to thank God is the death of Christ for us.

[ 24 : 32 ] How deficient is your faith? How heartfelt is your gratitude? God bless. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Good afternoon. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.