

Ten lepers healed: The joy of thanksgiving

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost—9 October 2016
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Psalm 66, Luke 17:11-19

Introduction

What would make you stand up and shout out with joy and thanksgiving? Maybe recent football results if your team won? The solving of a problem; the eureka moment? The return of a long absent child? Grandchildren? Good news on a medical front? A child found alive under the rubble of Aleppo?

It does raise another question. What part does gratitude play in our lives on a regular basis? I have an impression that we are less thankful than our forebears about many things.

Has thanksgiving and gratitude got a bad name? In a society of rights why thank anyone? After all what we get is our due by right. And someone must supply it and take responsibility for that.

And that seems to be tied to two other aspects of modern life. One is our individualism which sees itself as autonomous and independent of all others. We do not have need of gift.

And the other is suspicion. Nietzsche and Derrida have taught us to think of gifts as a Trojan horse, an overt form of self-interest and an attempt to elevate the status of the giver.

And there is always the practical atheism that pervades our lives. We make our own luck. There is no-one to blame and no-one to thank, only ourselves.

Today the powerful transforming power of thanksgiving comes through the readings and is especially focused in the psalm (66.1-4).

Jesus has been wandering around Galilee ostensibly making his way to Jerusalem but hardly in a straight line or by the shortest route. In this story Jerusalem now takes centre stage. Every story and encounter from now on with crowd, Pharisee, disciples and legal experts, finds itself played out under the long shadow Jerusalem casts and which shadow draws them all into its deep tragedy.

So let's turn to explore the story.

The ambiguities of the boundary, v. 11

Sometimes Luke has been criticized for offering us an obscure if not mistaken piece of geography or cartography. Jesus is on his way somewhere between in the region between Galilee and Samaria and that is a very confusing idea.

Now I think Luke was up to something else, a theme of this story and it has to do with boundaries and the no-man's land between them.

And I think that it goes something like this. The Samaritans might say that access to God is found behind their borders; and the Pharisees and legal experts might say the God is most definitely found on their side of the border. And, after all, Jesus is heading to Jerusalem, not Samaria.

But Luke is saying Jesus does not walk on either side of the border. Instead he walks with God in the in-between space, no-man's land where no custom rules and all is danger.

And it is there that he will find who he is looking for: Outside an obscure, unnamed village, ten lepers.

He finds another boundary; these ten men are on the outside of the village and although they approach him they keep their distance.

The ten lepers

And so the lepers enter the stage. Outsiders all, pariahs all, keeping their distance their role prescribed by the law Numbers 5.2-3; Leviticus 13.45-46 and custom.

The text does not call them lepers as though they belonged to a stigmatized group, but rather ten men with leprosy. Luke concentrates on their humanity not their disease, just like many people with disabilities do today. They want to be regarded as humans first.

In their common humanity and from their side of the boundary they call out to Jesus, whose reputation they appear to know. How do they know Jesus power to heal and his capacity for mercy? Who knows?

However, they know more than the insiders who should know more as they have travelled with Jesus, watching and debating with him.

Their cry is for mercy. This is the great cry of the psalms. It is the cry of pain and grief, the cry of great loss and exclusion. We read it in the psalm this morning. Cry is one of the great biblical themes. And it is a great human cry. We hear it out of the depths of Aleppo or Haiti or the trapped and abused child or woman.

The cry from these men is not that of people who have a life threatening disease; it is a social disorder. They are excluded from all human joy that comes with family and friends. They have only themselves in shared exclusion. Ritually unclean, they believed they lived under the curse of the law and relegated to the margins of society.

It is there that Jesus meets them. Firstly, he sees them. Again a word used in the psalm; God sees his people when they cry and then acts to set them free. Jesus hears the cry, sees the men and sends them on their way to healing and acceptance. They have to get on the way before they are made clean. They have to act in anticipation. They have to trust that what Jesus says, crazy as it might sound, is the answer to their cry.

And it is. They are made clean.

And one turns back.

The one; a Samaritan

And he turns back making a complete spectacle of himself; shouting and praising God. That was as uncommon then as it is now. And again there is an echo of the psalms, "Shout to the Lord..." and in the this morning's psalm, "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;" And again, "...sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise."

He takes up the position of humility with his face on the ground and offered up thanks giving or eucharist.

And he was a Samaritan. At last all the earth is praising the awesome deeds of God, for he is not a son of Abraham. He is the outsider among the outsiders; he is the outer ring of the outer ring. Jesus is astonished that Israel does not praise God for its welcome and cleansing. Only the outsider raises his voice for the world to hear.

Yet he praises God as a child of Abraham should and finds blessing beyond his wildest dreams. The final blessing of Jesus upon him is full of power. The English "Get up..." is

bland and sounds like a web site. The word is the verb of the word for resurrection. Rise up into a new life. Rise up into a new life in the age to come for that is what salvation is. Cleansed, welcomed into human society again, restored as a full human being, 'raised up' and ready to go and a full participant in the age to come, a welcome guest surrounded by love and mercy.

The Nine

But ... and this story has a big but. What of the other nine? What happened? What were they thinking?

Well we do not know for certain.

Maybe they just got so caught up in the joy of family reunion that the very blessing that made that possible was lost, buried in the celebrations.

Maybe at the other end of the spectrum they were afraid. They appear to have known something about Jesus so maybe they knew that in all likelihood he was doomed. There were spies everywhere so he was a dangerous man to associate with.

Maybe they were pragmatists and practical atheists who took their good fortune as it came and ran with it while they could. Who knows?

The question is simply left hanging for us to answer in our own way.

Thanksgiving: the gifted character of life

And it is that uneasiness that makes us look more closely. Thanksgiving lies at the centre of the Bible, both OT and NT, and thus of the Christian life.

Paul advocates "... giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Ephesians 5.20).

Meister Eckhart the mystical theologian makes the startling claim that if the only prayer you ever say is 'thank you' that would suffice.

Karl Barth explains "Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like voice an echo, and gratitude follows grace like thunder lightning."

And that is what the story tells us. Grace brings the echo response that thunders and lights up the sky.

We remind ourselves that every mouthful of food we take, every breath of air we inhale, every note of music we hear, every smile on the face of a friend, or child or a spouse and millions of things more are good gifts from God.

So significant is this for the spiritual life and leading a good human life that ancient Christians developed a discipline of listing blessings, naming them explicitly and singularly, and giving thanks. It is a healthy thing to practice especially in the world that I described at the beginning in which we assume that we have absolute right to health, happiness and every creature comfort known and yet unknown.

The rhythm of this story, cry, gift, faith, obedience and gratitude is the rhythm of the Christian life whether in the first or twenty-first century. And it is in this rhythm that true joy is found; not the stuff of the happiness industry, but joy rooted in cry and watered in mercy and thanksgiving.

To that rhythm Jesus always responds, 'Receive new life and enter into the blessings of the age to come.'