

Sunday 13th October 2019

Luke 17:11-19 / 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Prayer: Lord we thank you for the gift of your Word and as we think on these things open our hearts and minds to hear your word to us. Amen

I wonder when you saw the “Thanks” logo in the corner of this week’s newsheet if you thought we had got the weeks wrong? Didn’t we have harvest last week? – we gave thanks for food, for harvest, for so much that we enjoy – so why are we thinking about thanks again?

I’m sure many of you will remember that dreaded week after Christmas when you were forced to sit down to write those thank you letters, for the sixth box of handkerchiefs or those boring socks. Did you really have to give thanks? And like me were you told that if you didn’t say thank you, you may not get another present from that particular aunt?

There is a lot of concern, rightly, for mental health and wellbeing. Last Thursday was the world mental health awareness day. Things felt as though they were overwhelming at the beginning of the week – but the more I thought about thankfulness the more my mood improved. I don’t think being down and being thankful can go together. Once we start being thankful it lifts us beyond ourselves. But can we always be thankful?

Why do we find it so hard to give thanks? Can we ever have too much thankfulness? Why isn’t our thanks more spontaneous? Maybe it is when we receive something that we really, really want .. and perhaps at others times we don’t fully appreciate the thought that has gone into giving us something. However as people who claim to be following Jesus I think our lives be characterised by thankfulness!

Luke in his gospel delights to recount stories of those on the margins who have their lives turned around by meeting with Jesus. You couldn’t have been more on the margins – in fact pushed out of all the margins than having leprosy. You were forced to live outside the villages, away from and ignored by family and friends. Despised, rejected, outcast.

He tells us of group of 10 men who would never have got together if they hadn’t shared the same illness. One unlikely character was a Samaritan; he didn’t have qualifying heritage of a Jew – but all of them were forbidden to come together to worship God because of their leprosy.

One day Jesus was passing by – on his way to Jerusalem where he would face the cross and would never return that way again. It was their chance in a lifetime. If these 10 men missed this opportunity now – they would miss it for the rest of their lives.

There are times when God gives us unique opportunities to respond to him; maybe we feel something deep within us drawing us to him or to do something to show our love for him by serving others. If we miss that unique opportunity and timing it may never happen again in such a clear way.

No doubt these lepers had heard rumours of others being healed by Jesus and there was no way they were going to miss unique opportunity. So, respectfully keeping their distance from Jesus – as they weren’t seeking to contaminate him, they pleaded with him – have pity – have mercy on us. And that’s a prayer that God always answers – and Jesus acting in the same way as his Father couldn’t fail to respond.

It may seem strange to us but he gave them an instruction to go and show themselves to the priests. The only way they could be recognised as healed and accepted back into normal life and the worshipping community was through the word of the priests. Jesus simply told them to go – it doesn't say he healed them and then sent them off. They knew full well that they couldn't even approach the priests with their condition. They had to act in faith – and start that journey - still as lepers - but as they went they were cleansed.

When we have a deep feeling within us – or perhaps a feeling of being unsettled – it could be that God is speaking to us to do something – to respond to his love, to take another step of commitment, to serve him in a new way - and often. Although we may still have doubts, it's only as we respond that we see things coming together and it all starts making sense.

In our prayer for the week there was that lovely phrase - you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you. If God is stirring you – making you restless - are you prepared to respond to God so that you might find that rest – and know God's love poured afresh in your life? It won't be a giant leap but just another step on the journey of knowing God – but as that old Chinese proverb says – a journey of 1000 miles begins with 1 step.

Can you imagine the excitement of these men! As they walked – maybe stumbled initially they saw and felt the healing come into their lives before their very eyes. They were being healed. Strength was returning into their ankles and feet, the festering wounds on their hands healing over.

And now they just couldn't get to the priest fast enough! Soon they would be back with their families... soon they could live normal lives, work again, worship again ... They were single minded with their focus on reaching the priest – nothing else mattered apart from the new life they could enjoy. I imagine they even speeded up as they got closer to the priest.

But one of them stopped, as the full appreciation of what was happening hit him. No longer was he an outcast, rejected – but now he could freely enter the village that Jesus was passing through. His focus is no longer his healing but his healer! He made a decision – the priest would always be there so he could see him later – but Jesus might not be... and so he turns around and heads straight back to Jesus. But he doesn't come silently; he is praising God at the top of his voice. He couldn't stop himself! He wanted everyone to hear about the amazing change that was taking place in his life.

Why did he respond in such a way when the other nine didn't? Was he more aware of Jesus' acceptance and love particularly as normally Jews would have rejected him but now in Jesus he had discovered not just healing but a love that was all embracing! No wonder his heart was overflowing with thankfulness.

Maybe as he went back to Jesus he began to appreciate just who Jesus was – and when he fell at Jesus' feet – it wasn't just in thankfulness but also in worship? Here was a man like no other – God himself!

I hear a definite a hint of sadness in Jesus' response - Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?

Where were those who claimed to know God when it came to thanking him and acknowledging him? Too caught up in the excitement of the event? Too keen to get back into normal life? Too

much to get on with now? Too focussed on the cure that they had already forgotten the one who had brought it about?

But we would never have been like that – or would we? But when we receive answers to prayer – how quick are we to acknowledge God's hand in it – or are we like the 9 - too focussed on getting on with what God has given us that we forget to give him thanks and praise? Does it take someone who we wouldn't recognise as a Christian to show us up for our ingratitude?

Jesus said to the man at his feet - rise up and go. Rise up is actually the same word which is used for resurrection – this man was definitely starting a new life, the old had gone – through Jesus a new life has begun. His faith had made him well and his thankfulness had brought him into a deeper experience of Jesus and that brings its own inner healing!

The faith of the others had made them well as they headed off to the priest and became aware of physical healing – but I wonder if they missed out on an inner healing based on thankfulness and failed to enter into a new relationship of love with God because they didn't acknowledge Jesus?

Thankfulness brings its own healing – and is contagious as it overflows into community! We had such a great example of this last Sunday with Dorothy Peers! I think you would have found it hard to escape her thankfulness. She was so thrilled that on her 90th birthday her eye surgery resulted in a miracle that meant that for the first time since she was 6 – she could see without glasses! And as soon as this happened Dorothy gave thanks to God – and her thankfulness overflowed – and lifted us all!

Too often we get caught up in the trivia or the immediate – but we can develop lives of thankfulness. Our first reading began - remember Jesus Christ .. raised from the death, descended from David. And that could be the key! Remember Jesus – and how he conquered death and opened the way for us to have a loving relationship with God free from all that “binds” us in this life. And remember how he lived – a life of love and of thankfulness.

Shortly we will come to the Eucharist – which is simply a posh word for thanksgiving. It's not just remembering Jesus' prayers of thankfulness for the bread and wine but it's our time of thankfulness as well. Our giving thanks that Jesus lived and died for us, forgives us, heals us, accepts us. And having given thanks our response is to go out and live a life of thankfulness.

Father God you have blessed us with so much – open our eyes afresh to all that you have given us in Jesus – and may our hearts overflow with thankfulness. Amen

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