

Reading: Luke 17:11-19

Open the Gospel to us in a fresh and exciting way.
In Jesus name. Amen

Two men walking across a paddock turned to see an enormous bull charging towards them. Fearing for their lives they began to run. Pretty soon it became clear that the bull was going to reach them. Turning to his friend one man shouted, "We are going to die, say a prayer." The other shouted back "I don't know any, only the one my father used to say at dinner." "Then that will do," the other yelled. So, he intoned, "For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly grateful."

Being grateful is very important. Today we heard the reading of the healing of ten lepers. It's remarkable on at least three levels. Firstly, Jesus is mixing with lepers. Expelled from society, lepers would live in caves far from other settlements. They were unclean. The respectable Jew would not go near them. Jesus breaks the rules and allows them to come near. Secondly, they are healed. It would be easy to miss that point, but the healing is more than just physical. The priests had the authority to restore them to community life. Once declared clean, they could go back to family and friends and join in the things you and I take for granted. But the sting in the tail is not so much that only one of them remembered to come back and say thank you. The sting in the tail is that the one who came back was a Samaritan.

I wonder why the other nine didn't say thank you. Maybe they forgot. Maybe they were so enjoying their newfound freedom or worse maybe they had a sense of entitlement. More of that later.

A very subtle and important thing happens in the text, and this is where I wish I had more Greek. The ten are healed Luke tells us, but the one who gives thanks is made well. The sense is that when we remember to give thanks, something happens inside of us. Rather than just physical healing, being grateful restores us emotionally and spiritually as well. We go from healing to wholeness when we are grateful.

Today is our Thanksgiving Sunday for those that have helped us through COVID. And some of us have invited people who have helped us to church, as a way of thanking them. If you are one of those people, thank you, thank you, thank you. Renju, a member of our 9:30 congregation, helped me when I was in isolation by getting me an inhaler which I need for my asthma. So, I'm grateful to her. I wonder who you are grateful to. Maybe it's the supermarket workers who stock the shelves in the middle of the night so we can panic buy toilet paper. Or the people who gave you the vaccine, or the nurses or the truck drivers or the people that work through the night so we can have electricity, or ... the list goes on. We aren't saying COVID is over, but we are saying it's important to pause and be grateful.

The healed leper who comes back is a foreigner. Jews had no time for Samaritans. It was much like the relationship the Palestinians and Jews have today. There was history and it was complicated.

In my experience, it's often the foreigner, the outsider, who can teach us what gratitude looks like. I was once asked by two South African women to baptize their newly born children. Their husbands were civil engineers who came to help with the rebuild. What I remember most, apart from the children having unpronounceable names, is how grateful they were to be here. I asked them about giving birth here in Christchurch. They said it was a wonderful experience. In South Africa they don't always go to hospital because you can end up getting AIDS. They said the midwife had been so wonderful. They couldn't get over the fact that the midwife visited them in their home. In South Africa you line up for hours in the hot sun to see the midwife. But here, finding both children well, the midwife did the vacuuming for them.

Our daughter has just given birth at Christchurch Women's, and she found it a wonderful experience too. So often, pushed along by an entitled media, I hear stories of discontent rather than stories of gratitude.

To have an attitude of thankfulness is a core Christian virtue. After all, what has any of us done to deserve life itself? To be alive at all is a pure gift of God. Life is a gift, and we are God's thankful people.

That's what Eucharist means - to give thanks. The central prayer of our communion service is called the Great Thanksgiving. It is when we recall all the ways God has been good to us.

The challenge of today's reading is who are we in the story. Are we nine of the ten happy to receive but not thankful? Or are we the one who is thankful, and something changes inside of us as we remember to say it. Rather than entitled, we are so grateful that something changes inside of us. We move from healed to being whole in body, mind, and spirit.

For what we have received over this COVID season, and every season of our lives, may the Lord make us truly grateful.