

The Miracle of Gratitude

19 March 2023

St Luke's Harvest Thanksgiving 9.30am

Reading: John 6:27-35, Deuteronomy 8:6ff

One of the lessons my parents tried to impress on me was the importance of saying thank you. On Boxing Day, they would make me sit down and write to all the relatives who sent me presents. Dear Aunty Helen, Thank you for the lovely money...

Through Moses, the people of God are being reminded of the importance of saying thank you. Our Deuteronomy reading has the people of God, after a 40-year journey in the wilderness, just about to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. They have been through a lot together: wanderings, rebellions, wars, worship, guidance.

When you enter the land that God is giving you and settle, don't forget to regularly come and thank God for all his blessings to you. Go to the priest in office at the time and bring to him the first fruits of all your harvests. Say "We, your people, were wandering in the desert but now you have given us a place to settle, and we are grateful. We say thank you."

Today, some 2,600 years later, we are doing just that. We are bringing the gifts that God has given us and we are laying them before the altar and we are saying thank you.

Being grateful lies at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Central to our worship is the celebration of the Eucharist. Eucharist means to give thanks. And the central prayer that the priest says on our behalf during the Eucharist is called The Great Thanksgiving. Notice how many times and in how many different words we say thank you.

This goes against what we are taught. We live in a society of perpetual dissatisfaction. Advertisers spend billions every day to convince us that what we have is not enough, that what we have is not good enough. Billionaire Howard Hughes was asked how much money it would take to make him happy, "Just a little bit more," he answered. When will you have enough? He said when I have a little more. Pretty soon, this thinking starts to have a profound effect on the soul. If what I have isn't enough, maybe I'm not enough. We quickly get to a point where we have this constant feeling of dissatisfaction. Sometimes we see this at play when we watch our children. It used to take so little to keep them happy but now they seem to never be satisfied. Pretty soon every aspect of modern life takes on a kind of super-critical aspect. If only the government did this. If only the church did that. The worst dissatisfaction of all is only just around the corner ... if I don't have enough, if I'm not good enough. Then maybe faith is no longer enough. God is not enough. When God is not enough, to whom can we run?

But there's a way out of this dissatisfaction spiral. Jesus gives us the way out. We have heard it so often we might miss it. Jesus took the bread, and he gave thanks. There it is. Jesus gave thanks. He took the cup, and he gave thanks. In the giving of thanks, we find the antidote to the poison of dissatisfaction. Gratitude is the answer we are looking for.

Gratitude sets us free. It sets us free on a path to satisfaction. When we are grateful for what we have, then we have enough. When we are grateful for life then we are good enough. When we are grateful for our faith then we are content. When we are grateful for God in our lives, then we are deeply satisfied.

On one level Harvest Thanksgiving is just a cute thing to do. On another level it is a profound change of heart on our part. It is a call to thanksgiving for all that God gives us. It is a call to gratitude, and it is a call to satisfaction and contentment with all we have.

The antidote to a spiral of dissatisfaction with ourselves and our world is gratitude. To stop and take stock, to realize what a gift life itself is. None of us did anything to earn the right to be alive; it is a total gift. And when we say thank you for it, something is switched on in our soul, something that begins to bring a new light on all of life.

The diaries of Etty Hillesum are some of the most compelling spiritual writings of the last century. They were written between 1941 to 1943 in Holland and Etty was a Jew. She describes herself as a sophisticated but somewhat silly young woman studying psychology and literature. One day, trying to hide from the latest Nazi roundup of Jews she felt herself suddenly and unaccountably needing to kneel in her bedroom, feelings of overwhelming gratitude forcing her to her knees. This was not unrealistic gratitude. She knows the fate that awaits her, and yet she notices the jasmine plant and the sky. She writes how exotic the jasmine looks, so delicate and dazzling against the mud brown walls. I can't take in how beautiful a thing the jasmine is, but there is no need to. It is simply enough to believe in miracles.

Even at a time when murder was a state sponsored evil, Etty refuses to take the beauty of the jasmine for granted. She was overwhelmed with thanksgiving.

How much more then can we be grateful? What we have is enough. We are enough. God is enough and we are thankful.