

Sunday 12 October 2025
The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: 2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

NT: 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Gp: Luke 17:11-19

'You ungrateful little . . .' aren't exactly words that inspire or empower. They are more likely used to put us in our place. But these days, gratitude is big business. There are a host of books and online articles about it, there are apps and meditations you can buy, there are gratitude journals of every shape and variety that you can fill with all the things you are grateful for.

There's a good reason for this explosion of gratitude. It really does seem that remembering the things you are thankful for helps with your mental wellbeing. It can keep you more grounded and positive and help loosen the grip of anxiety.

So: who could be against gratitude?

At the same time, I'm a little cynical about how corporate this has become. Where there is money to be made, truth and depth are often casualties. Gratitude can get turned into a technique, a tool, something we do to make ourselves feel better – and so we're willing to pay the price.

I've done this myself, and I'm not trying to raise myself up above anyone else. Using these tools can help us to create habits and be more mindful of just how much we do have to give thanks for. But I still have a nagging worry. Like much of the self-help industry, I feel it is a mixed blessing. It brings benefits for sure. But it comes with a potentially unhelpful focus on the self, on the centre of my life being me. The great spiritual traditions certainly want us to love ourselves; but in loving ourselves as God loves us, we lose the need to be obsessed with ourselves so that we can be truly free.

Gratitude can also be a form of power. Telling someone that they should be grateful for what they have is a subtle way of making them feel guilty for challenging that status quo. Our gospel story today has much to teach us about a deeper form of gratitude: I mean gratitude as a fundamental way of life, a way of being. Not just a tool to be used, or an obligation to be fulfilled, but the very shape of our heart. This deep gratitude is not a technique, not even a feeling. It is a response to grace.

So: let's pause to take in some of the details of this passage from Luke.

The first thing to note is that the healing is given to lepers. Leprosy in Biblical terms is a name given to a variety of skin diseases including what we know as leprosy. All of which marked a person out as a social and religious pariah. To heal someone from leprosy is not only to help them physically. It is to bring them from exclusion to inclusion. It is an act of liberation – as social and even political as it is spiritual or bodily. So that is a first clue: gratitude has to do with a liberation from exclusion.

The second key element here is that the one who turns and gives thanks is a Samaritan. Jesus explicitly acknowledges this by saying ‘Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’

Samaritans appear at a couple of other crucial points in Luke’s gospel – notably the parable of the Good Samaritan. Preaching about this recently, I talked about how the Samaritans and Jews were locked in dispute about who were true to God’s covenant with Israel. I also mentioned how the Samaritan temple had been destroyed by a nationalistic Jewish government just over a hundred years before Jesus’ birth. The Samaritan was not a random foreigner, but a rival, one party in a bitter family dispute.

So when the Samaritan is introduced in this story, we know something important is being said. If gratitude has to do with liberation from exclusion, it also has to do with liberation from rivalry, resentment and violence - for these were the ingredients of the Jewish-Samaritan relationship.

There is a connection to our Old testament story of healing. Namaan the Syrian was not only a foreigner but a prominent representative of a hostile force. And yet, even in those dangerous and violent days, it was the flowing grace of God that showed itself the most powerful of all things. All his puffed-up power was shown up by the simplicity of what the prophet asked him to do: wash and be clean. The simplicity of grace: how we need that in the Holy Land today.

The final part of the story I want to note is the nature of the healing itself. We focus on the gratitude of the Samaritan and the ingratitude of the others. But before that, we need to remember that the healing performed by Jesus is *gratuitous*. In other words, it is offered freely, for its own sake, without condition.

In a sense, this last part is the most important of all and should come first. It is the healing grace offered by Jesus that sets people free, that brings them in from exclusion to inclusion. The grace of God – in making us, in loving us as we are, in being present to us through everything – is free. It has no conditions. There is no force involved. No one is made to come back and perform some ritual of gratitude out of mere obligation.

That is not the response God is looking for. The deepest response to unconditional love is unconditional love. Gratitude, I said before is not a technique nor even a feeling. And love is

not a technique or necessarily a feeling. Of course, there are times when we do feel intensely grateful, when we feel deep love. But feelings come and go. And they cannot be manufactured or commanded at will.

We are invited to something different: to practise gratitude as a way of life. Whatever we feel, we can always acknowledge that everything we are is given to us. Every one of our achievements depends on things we do not create - most obviously our own life. Before we take a step, before we say a word, before we breathe, the root of our life is *gift*.

You might think that sounds a bit negative. As if we just have to be passive. As if our achievements mean nothing. But that is far from true. The Samaritan is not just passive when he turns to give thanks, any more than the good Samaritan of the parable is just passive when he responds to a fellow human being in need.

The point is that our actions flow from grace. That our life – with all we do and achieve – is ultimately rooted in the unconditional grace of God, the free gift of God's being. God, Jesus teaches us, is gratuitous. There is no self-serving motive, no hidden agenda. But the gratuitous nature of God is revolutionary. It upsets all our conventions. All the things we tell ourselves about who deserves what, who belongs with whom. Just like the gospel story we have here, this is not about individual salvation or self-help or making ourselves feel better. It is about living a life shaped by gratitude, a life committed to liberation from exclusion, hostility, rivalry.

Being grateful in this way should never be way of keeping people in their place. But I do think we can live a life of gratitude even in relation to the negative things in our life. It might seem absurd, even dangerous to suggest this. How can we be grateful for the disease that is hurting our body or mind, how can we be grateful to people who bully or abuse us, or the losses that wound us?

I would never suggest that we simply accept our lot or passively put up with such things. We get treatment and support, we resist oppression, we seek justice, we get away from those who only hurt us. You see, a life of gratitude is not one of surrender to any human power. It is a life responding to God's unconditional love for us, the dignity and healing God wills for us, the inclusion and liberation God promises us. Gratitude is a response to grace: it transforms everything. It does not stop us raging or lamenting, it does not turn us into good little boys and girls who never complain. No, it helps us rage and lament deeply, as children of God, *knowing* that fullness of life is our calling and the calling of every other person.

By all means, we should foster the habits of gratitude. If journals and apps help, wonderful. Always remember, however, that gratitude is not something you are called to do. It is who you are called to be. For you are a sign of the grace that God has given and always will give. Freely.

Fr Steven Shakespeare