

Gratitude

On holiday, I happened to be sitting next to a stranger, who was also watching the Scotland rugby match. We were of similar age and started chatting about the holiday and weather. Suddenly, he held his hand up and I realised it was plastic. He said touch it. It was solid. He had a prosthetic hand. I said, what happened, and this opened the door for him to tell me of the tragic event that led him to lose his hand. He was a scaffolder and at the top of the building, when an electrical current surged through the metal scaffolding and literally frazzled his hand. He was electrocuted and his body was shot through with electricity. He said it was a miracle that he had survived. He then went on to tell me about his long road of recovery. It was challenging, hearing his life story, but what I was impressed with, was his state of mind, he wasn't angry or resentful, but he was filled with gratitude, because he was alive.

Gratitude is a powerful virtue. GK Chesterton called it the “Mother of all Virtues”

Jesus told a story of ten lepers who were healed, and only one came back to thank him. He asked where are the other nine. He knew that gratitude is vital for our lives.

Psychologists tell us that it is a positive force for good in our lives.

Below the surface of our lives, there are so many things to be thankful for, everyday pleasures that often go unnoticed. This may be a great book we read, laughter with a friend, time spent in the garden, a lovely walk, yes, even on our own, or even the joy of eating ice cream in the sunshine. Whatever these simple pleasures may be, consciously expressing our gratitude for them, can help us grow daily gratitude beyond the surface level. Psychologists call this the iceberg effect.

Undoubtedly, gratitude lies at the heart of our Christian faith. To people who have no idea of what Church is about or the Christian faith, they look to those who call themselves Christians and ask, is this what a Christian looks like?

The Apostle wrote, in Philippians 4

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your

requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

This comes from a man who suffered greatly for following Jesus. He was imprisoned, beaten, shipwrecked and yet he could still find reason to give thanks to God.

Jesus lived a life of gratitude. He could see reason to thank God in every circumstance, From the wee boy bringing his five loaves and two fish, he holds them up to thank God; to the widow putting her two coins into the Temple treasury, Jesus could see reasons to be thankful, in the every day occurrences of life.

Our Gospel story today is about gratitude.

It is about life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Note this before we dive into the story, Jesus is not saying this is what the Kingdom of this world is like; he begins by saying this is what the kingdom of Heaven is like, it is like a landowner who went out early in the morning...!

We see enough of what the Kingdom of this world looks like all week. On a Sunday, let us look at the Kingdom of Heaven.

Some of you may find this story challenging, because we may look at it from a world perspective, but look at it through the eyes of Jesus. At first sight it seems unfair. There is inequality with how the landowner pays his workers.

All the workers are gathered at the market square, which is the equivalent of the employment centre today. They are all there to basically sign on for a day's work.

They all need work, they all have hungry families to feed and a living must be made. There was no welfare state for them, work or starve was their daily challenge.

So, they are waiting for the landowner, to come out to hire them for a day's work.

The fittest and strongest are chosen first. They are the ones who push themselves to the front; who trample over the weaker and the older.

Rightly so, the landowner takes the strongest on first. He wants his grapes collected and so sets a contract with them. I will pay you the living wage, you will get what you deserve for your day's work. Fair! Yes! So, they sign up, but the landowner knows, he needs more workforce, and every three hours of the day, he brings others to work in the vineyard.

One hour to go, and you would think they were ready to pack up and go home. Not so, they will work till the end of the day, their agreed contract, and the landowner brings more recruits onto the vineyard for an hour's work. They would have expected one twelfth of the day's wage.

All's well, until it comes to payment. The landowner instructs his foreman to pay the last first and the first last, and they will all get the same pay for their work, what was agreed at the beginning of the day.

Then all hell unfolds!

Those who had worked all day grumble, why should they all be paid the same, why should those who work one hour get the same as those who worked 12 hours. It's just not fair!

And from the Kingdom of this world, where its survival of the fittest, this would seem to be the case!

In a gracious way, the landowner challenges one of the grumblers, he calls him "friend"; these grumblers should have been delighted at the denarius that they received for their day's work; it was a fair pay for a day's work; instead they turn and do not show gratitude to the landowner who has been generous to them but they grumble about the inequality of the situation.

"Friend, you are getting what you agreed, take your money and go home to your family. I wanted to pay the last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others."

I think this is the core of the story. The self-centredness of the labourers who grumbled. They were only thinking about themselves, and not the generosity and intervention of the landowner or the fortune of the other poorer and weaker labourers.

Its no accident, that this parable is placed after the story of the rich young man who could not share his goods and went away sad, and it comes before the story of the mother of James and John wanting preferential treatment

for her sons; asking Jesus for seats of prestige in Heaven. This tells us that we are all serving our own interests.

The disciples were the first to give up everything and follow Jesus but giving seats of preference is not what the Kingdom of God is about. The Kingdom is about equality and fairness and generosity and grace. Jesus finishes his discussion with the disciples regarding this incident with James and John by saying,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

God's ways are not our ways, neither are his thoughts ours, (Isaiah 58 v8) and that can be seen in this beautiful little story about what the Kingdom of Heaven.

We live in a world of inequality; it's seen all around us; the rich and the poor; the north and the south; the educated and uneducated and often it has to do with where we are born, our abilities or disabilities, and the colour of our skin.

We are blessed here in Bishopbriggs and at Cadder Church and we can say, our cup runs over with God's blessing. Look around us, look at the gifts we have; we are in the minority as far as the world is concerned, we are a blessed people, and what should be our response, gratitude and generosity. For that is the way of the Kingdom.

Can you imagine how those poor people, who were paid the same wage felt at the end of the day; when they returned home to their wives, their children; perhaps they are lame or some physical defect, and they tell their loved one, you'll never guess what happened today, the landowner paid us all the same wage. I'm so grateful to him, for today for I can put food on my table, I have money to care for my children, at least for a day. My heart is full of gratitude and tomorrow, I will be back in the market place, looking for the generosity of the landowner.

Jesus said, this is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. It's like a landowner, is he inferring that God is generous to all like this landowner. I think so!

The Kingdom of Heaven is a place of gratitude, not grumbling; where everyone is cared for, and the least are as blessed as the strong.

Gratitude begins with recognising that sources of goodness lie outside of our self. God's creation and his salvation through Jesus Christ are gifts for us to treasure and be grateful for.

It's good to affirm that we have a loving and kind God and that life is good and has many elements that make it worth living. This acknowledgment that we have received something good gratifies us.

Gratitude helps people focus on the positive aspects of their life. Gratitude can help build and maintain relationships with others, resulting in hope, life satisfaction, and more proactive behaviours toward others.

Gratitude appears to have a domino effect. If a person experiences generosity and grace, they are more likely to recognise the help and then later reciprocate that help. People who are thanked are presumably more apt to extend help to others in the future.

Gratitude is the key to a happy life and should be continuous, practiced daily.

Gratitude is a perspective – it is a choice. Let us choose gratitude today and every day and not grumbling. Grumbling is also a choice but it's not a choice for the Kingdom of Heaven. I'd like to leave you with this quote,

“Gratitude is the ability to experience life as a gift.”

Who or what are you grateful for today? How are you going to convey this thankfulness today and this week? Are you leaving Church this morning, a grumbler or a person who is filled with gratitude? If you are, you are building the Kingdom of God.

Amen