

Sermon 10 October 2021

Psalm 90:12-17 and Mark 10:17-31

Last week Clare and the youth team encouraged us to consider 'Gratitude'. What do we want to give thanks for?

Yesterday I was reflecting that I am so thankful for the people around me. I must have waved or spoken to at least 6 people in the time it took me to walk from my house and up Henleaze Road to the shops. Before that I had spoken with one neighbour over the fence and had an impromptu coffee with another, after they had asked me to do them a favour.

Now it happens I live in Henleaze, but I would hope that something similar might happen wherever I lived. And I'm so grateful that God has given us each a place in this world and opportunities to know and be known by others.

A few weeks ago, the journalist Matthew Syed wrote a short piece on gratitude. The extract that invited us to read further was – 'being grateful for jobs, possessions and pets is to totally miss the extraordinary gift of our existence'. The very miracle of life itself, this finite life, is precious and thrilling. It is a thing most wonderful, almost too wonderful to be. And instead of focussing our gratitude on stuff – material or otherwise – perhaps we would do better to focus on the gift of existence itself.

So, if I shift my thinking from thanking God for the fact that I am living where am I, and for the people I know, to thanking Him for being alive, where does that lead me?

This week's readings move us on from the first sort of gratitude, and challenge us to think about how gratitude changes us.

Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses. We only heard the last few verses. Moses had a chequered career, threatened with death as an infant, raised by a princess, having killed a brutal overseer, exiled he became a shepherd working for his father-in-law and was called by God to lead the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. And then, after leading a grumbling people in the wilderness, he was denied the opportunity to enter the promised land of Canaan and instead only witnessed it from Mount Nebo, as he handed over leadership of a new generation to Joshua. Remembering all that, and mindful of how easy it would be to be bitter about it all, we have a prayer that asks God to grant us wise hearts, that we might know God's steadfast love. The psalmist records affliction and evil and asks instead that God will prosper the works of our hands. It moves from disappointment, from saying what do we have to show for our lives except trouble, to looking to a future of hope. That God might grant us wise hearts and prosper the work of our hands.

That sounds to me like a mark of gratitude. How do we move forward from saying thank you, to be changed and to want wisdom and our work to be blessed?

The reading from Mark is a hard one. Commentators have tried all sorts of ways to make it easier for us. And I was intrigued by one who said, don't try to explain it, instead, try to experience it.

Maybe that's a cop out, but I'm going to try anyway.

We can work to keep any moral code, in this case the relational commandments. You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.' We can do it in a way that doesn't actually change us, doesn't impact on the things, the wealth, that give us status and power, self-preservation and security. Perhaps keeping to the moral code merely makes us respectably good. It doesn't change us and doesn't change the world around us.

What if we took to heart the way that Jesus invites changes to our values? In our actions, in our practices and in our generosity?

How can we put ourselves in other people's shoes? And allow that to affect our thinking? To keep in touch with our humanity and to stop seeing my fellow human beings as 'other', as different from me. To move away from the individual, me myself I way of thinking?

Last year you may remember the first of the exhibitions we had in church, created by Letty Pilgrim – what we have learned to love in lockdown?

As part of it, we were encouraged to donate to Bristol's homeless charity. And the charity itself asked us to join a different type of sleep out. They suggested people sought out a tricky place within the house or garden and slept there in solidarity.

I decided to sleep in my porch. I thought I was guaranteed security as I was behind a locked door. There was barely enough room to lie down. The streetlight meant it was never dark and the tiled floor was hard and cold. I lay there thinking about what I would do with my shoes and my belongings if I was homeless. Would I be safer near other people, or somewhere away on my own? Should I favour a place of light or darkness? What would I do if I need the loo? How would I clean my teeth or wash in the morning? I barely slept, and I felt very vulnerable. My head was directly under the letter box so if someone had spotted me and was malevolent they could have done me harm, even within my own home. I think that by six am I retreated to my own bed for a couple of hours.

The experience has stayed with me and has changed my giving pattern, but not the way I spend my time. On Friday night I listened to someone telling me of children in Lawrence Weston whose parents cannot afford heating so their flat has become desperately damp. The children have no beds and before the NW Bristol Homebank found them, were sleeping on a sheet on a concrete floor. I had more luxury on the tile floor of my porch as I used my camping mat.

Housing, good affordable housing should be a priority.

And here's my confession, I am also spending a large sum of money on myself – to improve my kitchen and downstairs living space – with the hope I can increase my ability to be hospitable.

Justin Welby in his book Reimagining Britain – Foundations for Hope – invites us to think about investment in terms of social, spiritual and moral capital rather than in investment just in money. That the way we spend what money we have, as a society and as individuals, should bring blessings, not burdens. Does that sound like the words from the Psalm? That God might grant us wise hearts and prosper the work of our hands?

Jesus is said to have looked at the rich man and to have loved him. He asked him to do something that was simply too hard for him. He asks a similar thing of us. Mark Twain said 'It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me, it's the parts I do understand'. And this is one of those that is hard for us to hear, but maybe not so hard to understand. Maybe our response to God's generosity goes beyond saying thank you, but causes us look at our values and to invest in the security of others. This is the way to treasure that will last, it is the way of gift, not merit. It treats one's neighbours with justice and fairness and perhaps that is why it is only the relational commandments that Jesus quotes. To repeat the words of Matthew Syed instead of focussing our gratitude on stuff – material or otherwise – perhaps we would do better to focus on the gift of existence itself, for ourselves and for others.

Amen

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