

Thess 5:18; Luke 18:1-14 A life of Thanks-living. bn.8.10.16

One afternoon a shopper at the local mall felt the need for a coffee break. She bought herself a little bag of cookies, a nice hot cappuccino, then found a place to sit at one of the crowded tables. Taking out a magazine she began to sip her coffee and read, not giving much attention to the man across from her reading his newspaper.

After a minute or two she reached out and took a cookie. As she did, the man seated across the table reached out and took one too. This put her off, but she didn't say anything.

A few moments later she took another cookie. Once again the man took one as well. Now she was getting a bit cross, but still she did not say anything.

After another couple of sips of coffee she took another cookie. So did the man. Now she was really irritated - especially since there was only one cookie left. Apparently the man also realised that there was only one left. Before she could say anything he took it, broke it in half, offered half to her, and ate the other half himself. Then he smiled at her and, putting the paper under his arm, got up and walked off.

She watched him go, steaming with annoyance. Her coffee break ruined, she was already thinking about how she would tell her friends about this offence! She folded her magazine, opened her shopping bag, and there she saw her own unopened bag of cookies.

I like that story - it makes me think about how well God treats me even when I am not behaving particularly well.

In our Gospel reading today, ten lepers pleaded with Jesus to heal them. He did. And that was HUGE. Lepers were outcasts - relegated to filthy colonies on the edges of cities. Being healed gave them their lives back. Despite this great gift, nine of those lepers did not treat Jesus particularly well. Only one came back to Jesus to say thank you.

You know, human beings are not born thankful.

Those of us who have children have no doubt been down the **birthday party road**. I remember the parties we had for our children when they were small. We'd invite all their little preschool friends, and they would arrive all prettied up, and of course they would all come bearing gifts. As each child handed over his gift, and it was eagerly grabbed and the paper ripped off, inevitably,

we would have to whisper in the birthday child's ear "What do you say?" and the child would parrot "thank you."

We have to TEACH our children thankfulness. It does not come naturally! We have to model it, we have to ask for it, and we have to correct them when it's not displayed. It seems it takes *years* of patient teaching for our kids to come out with 'thank you' on their own.

Now that we're adults, if we really scrutinised our own behaviour, I wonder if we would find the same need for correction in ourselves.

Dostoyevsky, the great Russian writer, said, "I believe that the best definition of man is the ungrateful biped."

The apostle Paul, talking about the unbeliever in the first chapter of Romans, says, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

It seems that 'thanklessness' is the default attitude of humanity. -Which stands to reason – we are self centred beings by nature.

Unfortunately, thanklessness can also be found in God's community. **Author Jerry Bridges** says that 'thanklessness' has become one of the church's 'respectable' sins that we tolerate. Having said that, I don't find a great deal of thanklessness here. In fact I find the opposite - but I have been in churches that are contaminated by angst and complaining, and sadly, thanklessness rules.

As God's people we are called to live in an attitude of thankfulness. Our lives should be lives of **'thanks-living.'**

A thankful heart is something that can be cultivated. In fact, it needs to be cultivated if we are to be faithful to God.

In 1:Thessalonians 5 and v 18, we read, "give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Now, that's not give thanks *for* all circumstances, bit give thanks *in* all circumstances. There is a difference.

God does not ask us to be masochists, and pretend to enjoy and be thankful for all the unpleasant and difficult things that come our way – as if somehow,

taking a martyr's stance and saying 'bring it on!' will make us more holy. No. Paul is saying give thanks *in* all circumstances.

Well, I don't know about you, but if I'm suffering, or if I'm in pain; if I'm feeling hurt or depressed, I don't particularly *feel* like giving thanks! How are we supposed to give thanks if our world is caving in around us?

The psalmists give us the answer: In today's psalm, we read:

Psa 66:5 Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.

Here are some other verses from the Psalms - see if you can pick the common thread:

- "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good."
- "Give thanks to the Lord for his righteous laws"
- "Give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love"
- "I will give thanks, for you are my God"

Where is the focus? (feedback) Yes! That focus is on God, not on the circumstances!

The apostle Paul often had a hard time in his ministry. He was beaten, imprisoned, starved, spat upon, ridiculed, shipwrecked... You name it, Paul copped it for the Gospel. But because Paul had cultivated a thankful heart, he was able to say, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Which brings us to the next point.

Thankfulness transforms!

Paul discovered the secret of victory. His thankful heart encouraged his trust in God. His trust in God brought about peace of mind. His attitude of trust and contentment unleashed the power of God within him, so that he could cope with pretty much anything life threw at him.

Instead of looking constantly at his hardships, instead of nursing an angry and twisted spirit, leading to bitterness and unhappiness - Paul was a free spirit. He could be content.

In Philippians 4:6, Paul affirms this attitude. He says “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

There it is again! As we bring our requests to God with thankful hearts, that thankfulness becomes an expression of our trust God, and our trust in God results in his peace guarding our hearts and minds. The imagery there is of a sentry protecting our hearts from harm. God’s peace keeps us balanced when life threatens to bring us unstuck.

Does anyone know what the most common mental illness is?

(depression) Latest research tells us that at any given time, 20% of Australians will be suffering from some form of depression. That’s 1 in 5 people. Now while clinical depression is a serious condition and needs medical intervention, cultivating a thankful heart can be a great depression buffer, promoting a healthier, more contented frame of mind.

Thanksgiving brings transformation!

Lastly, thankfulness builds community

Paul, writing to the Christians in Corinth, said, “I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Jesus Christ.” The Corinthian church was in many ways a thorn in Paul’s side. There was in-fighting, were immature and carnal, and he wrote three letters that we know of, to sort them out. Yet he says he *thanks God* for them.

What does he thank God for? Their arguing and bickering? Their competitive spirit? No – he thanks God for God’s own grace which the Corinthians had received in Jesus. This group may have been a problem church – but they had opened their hearts to Jesus. And that was what Paul recognised and gave thanks for. Once again, it is an issue of *focus*. If we focus on God – in this case, God in his people - rather than the problem – it’s easy to be thankful.

Just think - if all God’s people were able to live in this attitude of thankfulness for one another, how much would that affect the closeness of their church communities?

This was certainly a very big part of the witness of the early church. A theologian and historian of the early church, called Tertullian, noted that the pagan Romans commented, “See how these Christians love one another!”

Let me close with some further thoughts from Paul in his letter to the Colossians. He says: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And *be thankful.*” He goes on to say, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks* to God the Father through him.”

Let's pray...