

## Sermon at St Mary's Barnes

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

13 October 2019

It's good that as we reach the end of the year in which Luke's gospel has been the main source for our Sunday gospel readings, we should be treated to another story unique to Luke – Jesus's healing of ten lepers and the Samaritan's return to say thank you (Luke 17.11-19).

It is the saying of thank you that I want to dwell on this morning, but first the context of this particular story. Among the gospel writers, Luke is the evangelist to the gentiles, the one who tells us the story of the Good Samaritan and goes out of his way to tell us of instances where outsiders exceed, in their responses of faith, those to be found among Jesus's own people, the Jews. Remember the Roman centurion who longs for his servant to be healed, or the crippled woman who appears in the synagogue on the sabbath. And in today's gospel it is the Samaritan, the outsider, who praises God for what Jesus has done for him and learns from Jesus that it is his faith in God that has made him well.

While this story seems so firmly set in the specific circumstances of first century Palestine, to get its message and learn its lesson, it's not necessary to be leprous or a Samaritan. What's necessary and what God longs for, through Jesus, is that we recognise what he does for us all. Yes, those nine Jews were also healed, as well as the Samaritan, but we must also recognise God's care for the outsider, in whatever context that label may apply.

We can all feel outsiders, in big things and in small, and it is often our awareness of being on the outside that enables us to know God's unfailing care for us. Suppose you have been hurt by something someone has said or what you feel to be important has been overlooked, even ignored. And I'm not talking here of overt rudeness or hostility, I am talking about all the little knocks and disappointments that are part of our human condition. We may celebrate our joys with God, but is it not these little knocks that we bring to God in prayer for his healing and restoration? And, as we do so, we are moved to say thank you.

Thankfulness is, at one and the same time, both simple and profound. Simple in the sense in which we all teach our children to say thank you because we need to learn that basic truth that we are not alone and that we have to learn about give as well as take. And it's in that give that we plumb the depths of

thankfulness. That recognition of give tears us away from ourselves and requires us to look to the giver.

I know so many people, and I'm sure you do too, who at some point in their lives are seized with the desire, as they put it, to give something back. And this typically involves putting themselves out, with their time, their money, their talents, to help the other, the outsider. And they do it out of thankfulness for all that they have received. It may not involve explicit thanks to God. Indeed, it probably doesn't. But there's something in the adage that 'the worst moment for an atheist is when he feels grateful and has no one to thank'. And yet, on the face of it, this grateful atheist is the one to be thanked. He has taken care of the outsider. And it's here that we're beginning to touch on the heart of our religion.

In a sermon some weeks ago Bishop Richard spoke of a letter written by William Wordsworth in which he wrote: 'theologians may puzzle their heads about dogmas as they will, the religion of gratitude cannot mislead us.' And Wordsworth goes on: 'I look abroad upon nature, I think of the best part of our species, I lean upon my friends, I meditate upon the scriptures .... and my creed rises up of itself' (*Letter to Sir George Beaumont, 28 May 1825*).

Not exactly today's language, but doesn't that ring true? Thanksgiving, in the Greek, the Eucharist, nourishes us. What rises up of itself is our sacrifice of thanks and praise; and what do we mean by sacrifice? Not the relinquishing of anything, in the sense we use the word in common parlance. What we are doing is seeking to recognise what God does for us over and over again in the risen life of Jesus in our midst. We are remembering that supper on the night before Jesus died; and we must remember now, in the moment, not looking back. Jesus gives himself once for all on the cross. The human Jesus does this in thankfulness to his Father who, through his Son and the mystery of the resurrection, reveals the kingdom of heaven, the wonder of eternity.

This very morning, we are receiving a joyful gift, and the more we, in thankfulness, give ourselves away, the greater is our joy. This is the mystery of love – the love of God and our love for one another; the mystery of faith that we shall shortly proclaim; the mystery of God's giving us himself in the Eucharist so that we are thereby commissioned as the body of Christ.