

Living in Gratitude: Westgate Anniversary – Oct 2005

A Sermon by Anne Wilkinson-Hayes

There is a Jewish folk tale that goes something like this:

There was once a young man who aspired to great holiness. After working at it for some time he eventually presented himself to the rabbi

“Rabbi, I think that I have achieved sanctity” he announced.

“Why do you think that?” asked the rabbi.

“Well” said the young man “I’ve been practising virtue and discipline for sometime now and I have grown quite proficient at them. From sunrise to sunset I take no food or water. All day long I do all kinds of hard work for others and I never expect to be thanked. If I am tempted by the flesh, I roll in the snow or in thorn bushes until the temptations go away and then at night, before bed, I practise the ancient monastic discipline of administering lashes to my back. I have disciplined myself so as to be holy.”

The rabbi was silent for a while, then he took the young man to the window, and pointed to an old horse in the field.

“I have been observing that horse for some time” the rabbi said “and I’ve noticed that It doesn’t get fed or watered from morning to night. All day long it has to do work for people and it never gets thanked. I often see it rolling in the snow or in bushes as horses are prone to do, and frequently I see it get whipped. But I ask you: is it a saint or a horse?”.

The parable shows us that it is simplistic to identify sanctity and virtue with self-renunciation and with the capacity to do what is difficult. Often in our minds we think that saint = horse ie, doing that which is miserable and difficult.

But the reality is that to be a saint is to be motivated by gratitude.

Scripture makes this clear over and over again from Adam & Eve in the garden where their primary fault was a failure in being receptive and grateful. God gives them life, each other and the garden and asks only that they receive it properly – in gratitude - receive and give thanks. The original sin was precisely Adam and Eve’s failure to do this. Instead they took the apple.. taking as a right that which could only be received gratefully as a gift. And at the other end of the bible we hear Jesus at the table simply saying “Receive and give thanks”. Only after the response of gratitude do we go on to break and share. Before all else we give thanks.

To receive in gratitude is the primary of all Christian virtues and is the beginning of sanctity. Think of people who you view as holy, and I’ll bet that they are grateful people – people who see and receive everything as gift.

We won’t earn our way into heaven by beating ourselves up or by taking life and love for granted. Living in a place of gratitude is about being attentive and fully

present to all the sensual experiences of life – noticing the colour of a leaf, the smell of blossom, the taste of wine, the tone of a voice. Living in a place of gratitude is about recognising the immense privilege of waking every morning and having the day stretching ahead – full of new experiences and new opportunities to share life.

Now some of you will be already cringing at this Pollyanna approach to life, because how can we be ‘glad, glad glad to be here’, when we are facing illness or redundancy, or staring into the black hole of depression or bereavement. I don’t think that we are asked to give thanks for the bad stuff that happens, but the encouragement is that we can find things to be grateful for even in the darkest places and by intentionally living in a place of gratitude, even if we cling on by our fingernails, there is the possibility of healing and new life.

Our lectionary reading for this morning is a prayer of thanksgiving – an outpouring of gratitude about one of the earliest Christian communities. This letter to the Thessalonian church is thought to be Paul’s first letter written only 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Acts, we are told that Paul was only with them for less than 4 weeks. He preached only three Saturdays in the synagogue before being run out of town, but despite this short time of teaching, the Christian community had embraced the gospel and started living out the faith in some amazing ways.

Today is the 23rd anniversary of this church and today is a time of thanksgiving for the year that has been. We’ve already highlighted some of the great things that have happened over the last 12 months. We’ve grown; we’ve seen people make commitments through baptism; we’ve extended the pastoral team; we’ve clarified our mission, and deepened relationships with Karen and Chin friends; our worship has been connecting us with God and I sense that the church is a much happier place than it was 18 or 12 months ago, and I guess many of us could write a letter of gratitude for this congregation, just as Paul did for the Thessalonians, and maybe that would be a good thing to do this later on this afternoon, as a conscious step towards living in a place or spirit of gratitude.

Lets briefly note why Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonian church and consider the challenges that this might set us for the year ahead. Anniversaries are rightly a time for celebrating the past but they can also be times when we set our faces to a new future.

Paul firstly commends the church for its on-going efforts – ‘*your work of faith, labour of love and steadfastness in hope*’. And I think that this could be said of people here at Westgate. Many of you have given vast amounts of time to this church and have remained faithful to the church even when you saw little fruit for it. You remained hopeful in God that keeping serving and keeping loving would ultimately reap some rewards and we are beginning to see that, and its important to acknowledge and thank those who have hung in here over many years. The consumerist culture of our time does not reward dogged faithfulness – many

people look to have their needs met without being willing to put in the hard yards. I meet people traveling vast distances to large churches, where they can just absorb the benefits without putting anything in. That does not bear the fruit of the Kingdom, and if the church here is to continue to grow and serve this area, then we need to maintain our efforts and continue to give thanks for works of faith, labours of love and steadfast hope.

The second area that Paul gives thanks for is that they became imitators of Christ and didn't respond to the gospel with just words but by living out their new-found faith in the power of the Holy Spirit – seeking to live as Jesus did. The life of Jesus was still part of the living memory of the apostles – they were very consciously trying to model the way Jesus lived and spoke to the new converts in Greece and Asia who had never met him. And in the year ahead we need to give thanks for every Christ-like action we see here and encourage each other to keep making the hard choices to be like Jesus in the way we react with each other, in the way we serve the least among us, and in the lifestyle choices we make. I also believe that we need to acknowledge the part of the Holy Spirit in our lives. I was having a conversation with some people last week about how in post-Christendom, post-modern society there is a greater openness to the miraculous outside the church than in it! And for a generation that wants to experience spirituality, rather than just respond cerebrally, we actually need to become more articulate and experienced ourselves about the super-natural in our midst, or, if that's a step to far, at least offer more opportunities for mystery and transcendence or otherness in our gatherings... and to give thanks for it.

The third thing that Paul gives thanks for is that they remained joyful despite all the persecution and shunning of their fellow citizens. We don't face persecution here in Australia, but we hear the stories of our Karen and Chin friends, we know about Christians in China and Romania, we hear the discrimination against Christian dalits in India, and in sharing a little of their pain we also know the inspiration of encountering people who remain cheerful and hopeful against all the odds. I met some wonderful African brothers and sisters at the Congress in Birmingham who live with the daily reality of death – Aids is devouring the population in some areas. Pastors are exhausted from conducting funerals day after day and trying to care for grieving people, yet the refrain I kept hearing was "but we thank God for so many blessings". I met a man from Congo who does the same job as me – he doesn't get paid for it; he runs his own church and he doesn't have a smart 6l Commodore to get him around. He walks for sometimes a whole day a week to go and encourage or pray with a fellow pastor, "but God is good" he says to me "and we see many blessings" and I find it so challenging that people who really know what it is to suffer and to have so little can still be characterized by gratitude. How much more should our lives be overflowing in gratitude when we have lifestyles that many cannot even dream of. And it is out of genuine gratitude that we can share with others because we recognize that all that we have is gift, not right. Receive and give thanks, then break and share. That is the Eucharist - the true nature of thanksgiving.

The fourth area I want to mention briefly is the the last thing Paul talks about in this first chapter. He gives thanks that the Thessalonians are known in the area for having turned away from idols to serve the living and true God. I think that this relates to being imitators of Christ, but Paul is thankful that the Thessalonians were counter-cultural. They turned from the dominant powers of their time and chose a different way. I think that we can give thanks that Westgate's history is one of being counter-cultural. The church was birthed in the desire to turn away from the idols of wealth and success in the Eastern suburbs, and to relocate amongst the poor in the West. Our challenge, as we look to the future is to ensure that we keep encouraging each other to do that – to name the powers that tempt us in false directions and to reassert our commitment to go against the tide – to go the way of Christ.

And that starts from being grateful; from giving thanks; from living in a spirit of gratitude, because if we are so grateful for the multitude of gifts lavished upon us, we are empowered to sit loosely to them, and that is counter-cultural. Our society is all about amassing, protecting, shoring ourselves up against adversity, because we are fearful rather than grateful. Gratitude reasserts the goodness and faithfulness of God in all things and trusting in that allows us to live differently. So lets seek to live the year ahead in a spirit of gratitude and, in so doing, continue the Westgate tradition of releasing transformation and healing into our community and further afield.