

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2023

An Attitude of Gratitude

Rev. David Jones

Based on: Luke 17:11-19 Deuteronomy 8:7-18 Psalm 65:1-8 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

One of the many joys of retirement for which I am thankful is that I can now read books which in some cases have sat on my shelf for years, watch those movies of interest that no longer are showing at the theatre, and spend greater quality time with Candace, step-daughter Melissa and grandchildren Griffyn and Tarryn. It's also a time of reflection and reminiscence, as I look back over the years of my life, its highs and lows, particularly in my role as a hospital chaplain, initially at the McMaster Medical Centre, followed by the Juravinski Hospital. And as is the case for many people post-retirement, I also find myself asking whether my contribution in this respect made a difference. It's an existential question as much as anything else, for it pre-supposes that I was in a position to do such, and whether my efforts were not only applied conscientiously but also appropriately. I like to think they were, but I expect time will tell, and with the passing of time, greater insight. And so it is that I find myself in this pulpit, after an absence of some twenty years or so, having been asked by Susan if I would consider joining the preaching roster, now that I may have the time to prepare and deliver a sermon. And so with considerable fear and trepidation I now proceed with the task, only too aware that my skills in this regard are perhaps a little rusty!

The setting for today's Gospel story is the Decapolis, a portion of which separated Galilee from Samaria. A region populated primarily by Gentiles, it was a federation of ten city-states, many of which were founded following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE and after the arrival of the Roman general Pompey, who conquered the most of the area from the Hasmoneans in 63 BCE. Each of the city-states were thoroughly Hellenistic, which often brought them into conflict with the Jewish and Aramean peoples who were native to the region, and resented the influx of religious and cultural practices often in conflict with their own. Pompey in fact had been considered a liberator from Hasmonean rule, given its repressive nature and emphasis upon adherence to Mosaic Law.

And so we read that while on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus enters a village where ten lepers approach him at a distance, asking that he have mercy upon them, knowing that he has the ability to heal them, as his reputation has preceeded him. Jesus grants their request, and tells them to show themselves to the priests, as required by the Law, in the Book of Leviticus. And as they went on their way they were made clean. But one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice, and prostrating himself at Jesus's feet, thanking him. And he was a Samaritan. Jesus then asks were the remaining nine lepers were, who also had been made clean, noting that the Samaritan, whom he calls "a foreigner", was the only one to return and give praise to God. He then tells the Samaritan to get up and go on his way, identifying at the same time that his faith has made him well.

Outlined throughout the first five books of Hebrew scripture, what Christians call the Pentateuch, and our Jewish neighbours call the Torah, the Law articulates how God's chosen people were to live their lives subsequent to entering and then conquering the Promised Land. Its emphasis is upon maintaining the purity and righteousness of Israel as a people, that they may become an example to the nations around them, and thereby encourage these people to emulate their ways, and come to worship the same god. Sadly, by and large it proved a colossal failure, as generation after generation of Israelites, with few exceptions, chose instead to copy the ways of the very nations they were to lead out of darkness into light. And thus it came to pass that first the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire in 721 BCE, followed by the absorption of the southern Kingdom of Judah into the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE, and Israel ceased to exist as a nation, with the additional expulsion of the majority of its people from Jerusalem and surrounding area to the city of Babylon itself, and the destruction of its temple, built at great cost by Solomon.

During the Babylonian captivity extensive debate began amongst the leaders of the Judeans as to the cause of their exile and how their land and temple might eventually be restored to them. Synagogues began to develop during this period, allowing for the continued worship of God and study of the Torah, which gradually became central to the life of the community. The process of discernment continued after defeat of the Babylonian Empire by the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 538 BCE, following which many of the exiles were permitted to return; soon after they began construction of a new temple, under the direction of Ezra and Nehemiah. And it was during this period that the final redaction or editing of the Pentateuch occurred, which reflected the conclusion arrived at by the Judean leaders, that the captivity had occurred because of the Israelites persistent idolatry and disobedience toward their God.

For Jewish people living in Roman-occupied Judea in the first century, the Law was a vital component of their lives, as much of their living was prescribed by rules and regulations arising from its interpretation, a task performed by the Pharisees and their scribes, the "teachers of the law", who studied its every aspect. From their rising up until their lying down each day, virtually every part of a man's or woman's life was governed by its application. Although viewed as oppressive by outsiders, it offered a way whereby each member of the community, whether in or around Jerusalem or beyond in cities of the Diaspora, could remain in "right relationship" with the God they worshipped. Any transgression of the Law could be addressed by pilgrimage to the Temple in the capital, where a sacrificial offering would be made by one of the priests on behalf of the person who had committed the offensive act, subsequent to payment in coinage deemed acceptable, available only in the Temple environs. It was a legal system designed to maintain the "purity" of the Jewish people, whether near or afar, and thereby encourage their God to act in a beneficent manner toward them, his "chosen people". And because of the central role played by the Law in this respect, it was considered sacred and unassailable, to be treasured by each and every inhabitant.

And yet, strangely enough, it was the Samaritan, rather than any of the Judean lepers, who returned to express his gratitude to Jesus for having been healed of his disease. Presumably the others simply went to the priests as instructed, were inspected as required, and allowed to

re-enter the community, no longer considered “unclean” and therefore outside the parameters of the Law. One would assume that they in particular should have recognized the gift which had been bestowed, permitting their re-integration into the mainstream of Judean life, once again as one of God’s “chosen people”. And yet it was the Samaritan, who not only returned but also humbled himself at the feet of Jesus in an act of veneration and worship, indicating his awareness of Jesus as more than a healer, but one through whom the very presence of God had been revealed. And in so doing Jesus identifies that it is the Samaritan’s faith which led him to return to express his gratitude, and in the process made him whole.

Located between Galilee and Judah, the region of Samaria originally comprised much of the Northern Kingdom of Israel; its capital city, also named Samaria, had been rebuilt by Herod the Great and renamed Sebastia, after it had been destroyed by the Hasmoneans during an attempt to expand their territory and eradicate its Hellenistic influence. In addition to the city of Samaria, the city of Shechem and the temple atop Mount Gerizim were also destroyed, both sites considered holy by the Samaritans. They were deemed “foreigners” because of their intermingling with Assyrian colonists following the conquest, their refusal to recognize any scripture other than the Torah, and their worship at a temple other than that located in Jerusalem. In other words, the Samaritans were understood to be ethnically and religiously impure, to be shunned whenever possible, as any contact would defile. They were ritually “unclean” in much the same way lepers were, to be avoided at all costs, even to the point of travelling around their territory, rather than through it, when journeying north or south.

And yet it was the Samaritan who not only experienced healing and but also was made well because of his faith, in spite of being ethnically and religiously impure. No doubt this was the message the author of Luke wished to convey to his Gentile audience, and now to us as we hear the story. That God’s grace is available to anyone, regardless of his or her impurity, regardless of his or her disease, regardless of his or her defilement. And in seeking to be healed of whatever afflicts us, we begin a journey with God whereby we can be made whole, through the exercise of our faith, in the company of others also doing the same. It’s seldom an easy journey; one often replete with trials and tribulations which sometimes appear beyond our ability to surmount. And yet the opportunity is there, the same as it was for the Samaritan, who, having undergone healing, returned to the one through whom it had been provided, having recognized the Source from which it came. The choice, as always, is ours. But it seems to me that this is something to be grateful for, not only on Thanksgiving Sunday, but every day of the year, until our time draws to a close, and we enter the life to come. AMEN