

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 13th October 2019
Luke 17: 11 - 19

If a waiter writes the words 'Thank you' on your bill after your meal at a restaurant you frequent then you are much more likely to leave a bigger tip.

Back in 1976 a study was conducted by contributors to the *Journal of Marketing*.¹ It turned out that customers of a jewellery shop who were called and thanked for their purchase were subsequently 70% more likely to buy again from that shop. In comparison, customers who were called and told about a sale the shop was holding were only 30% more likely to buy again. Customers who were not called at all were not at all likely to buy again.

In light of that, I suppose that when that one leper returned to Jesus to say thank you, 'He threw himself down at Jesus' feet and thanked him,'² that expression of gratitude from the leper, which clearly Jesus appreciated, 'He said to the man, "Stand up and go on your way; your faith has cured you,"' meant that Jesus was 70% more likely to help that leper again. Those who didn't say thank you, were running a risk that their future needs would be ignored.

We should take note of that because let me tell you about the words, cards, notes and expressions of gratitude that I have received for the work that you did last week. Throughout this week I have heard often the words 'thank you,' from those people to whom you delivered flowers and fruit after last week's Harvest Festival service. As much as the gifts, they appreciated the visits, and that is particularly important because the visits help build relationships.

Scientifically speaking, these expressions of gratitude that I have received should motivate us to continue to do this kind of thing. So, in addition to their words of thank you, let me add mine, and say to you on behalf of St. Ninian's thank you for what you did during last week to help those of our congregation who don't often leave their homes, to feel remembered and loved.

Gratitude, saying thank you, plays an important role in people's lives. In particular, it plays an important role in the lives of people who are religious. Worship that includes gratitude – saying thank you to God – is a common theme in, for example, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and of course Christianity. Indeed, gratitude in Christianity has been understood to be the single most significant attitude to mould and shape the entire Christian life. Martin Luther, the German priest who began the Reformation in the 15th century referred to gratitude as "The basic Christian attitude."

You might think that this is unsurprising. After all, is it not the case that everyone says please and thank you, not just religious people and not just Christians in particular? No, it is not the case. Gratitude is not a universal cultural trait. There are some cultures where it does not happen at all.

Instead of an ethic of gratitude some cultures have an ethic of duty and responsibility. Where that exists, there is often no need for words like please or thank you. For example, in such a culture, in a household everyone has their roles and responsibilities. One spouse has the role of earning money. Another spouse has the role of cooking dinner. The children have the role

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gratitude#cite_note-11

² Luke 17: 16

of washing-up. In such a culture no one needs thanked, because everyone is playing a role and has a responsibility.

Some other cultures have a transactional ethic in place of please and thank you. We can see evidence of this when we buy something from a shop; you take the goods you have bought, and the shopkeeper takes your money. If thank you is said, it is out of politeness not a deep sense of gratitude.

We can find this transactional culture a lot in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, and in the popular understanding of our faith. In a transactional culture, the relationship between God and people is one of indebtedness. People feel indebted to God for God's goodness and so they make an offering in the Temple, or sing a hymn, or say their prayers. It is a culture where, in a crisis, people pray asking God, 'if you save me, I'll believe in you and go to church.' It is a culture where people, who have believed and attended church all their lives, have a crisis of faith when trouble hits them and ask, 'How could God allow this to happen to me, a Christian, when my friend, the atheist, has a trouble free life?'

The answer to that question is, because our faith is not transactional. God is not indebted to us for our faith in him, our worship of him, or our good attendance at church. Moreover, we are not indebted to God for his goodness to us. When the ten lepers were healed by Jesus, that wasn't a transaction. When the nine lepers did not return, Jesus didn't seek to reverse the miracle. Even though they didn't say thank you, they were still healed.

Thank God this is the case, because it turns out that feelings of indebtedness have the opposite effect on people to feelings of gratitude. If you feel indebted to someone, then you are motivated to avoid the person who has helped you. But, when you feel gratitude to someone else, it motivates you to seek out your benefactor in order to improve their relationship with them.

That is what is going on in the story we read this morning about those ten lepers. They were all healed, but nine of these lepers saw this healing as a transaction, and as Jesus asked them to do, they went off to the priests, indebted, to complete their side of the bargain, to complete the transaction. One of the lepers didn't feel indebted but felt a deep sense of gratitude, and as a consequence sought out his benefactor, Jesus, in order to build a relationship with him.

Jesus said to him, "Stand up and go on your way; your faith has cured you," literally 'saved you'. That leper wasn't just healed, he was saved. In what way was he saved?

The Roman orator Cicero said, 'Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others.' And so, it turns out. David DeSteno, a professor of psychology at Northeastern University in Boston has shown in his work that people who feel grateful rather than indebted are more likely to be honest, are more likely to help others who request assistance, to divide profits in an egalitarian way, to be loyal even at cost to themselves, and to be less materialistic. Grateful people even exercise more.³

For Jesus, salvation is not about physical healing, but about whether you love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself. When the leper recognised that Jesus had healed him, and when he returned to say thank you, that expression of gratitude, which indicated he was likely to have many other virtues, was enough for Jesus to know that the leper's faith had saved him.

³ <https://aeon.co/ideas/the-fast-track-to-a-life-well-lived-is-feeling-grateful>

Our Christian faith, which is so often misunderstood to be a transactional faith based on give and take – go to church, say your prayers and you'll reap the blessings – is in truth a relationship based on gratitude.

You should come to church, say your prayers, read your Bible, help others, but not because you feel that you owe it to God, far less because you think that doing so will earn you a place in heaven or blessings on earth, you should do these things because you want to build a virtuous relationship with God and with the people of God; a relationship of honesty, of generosity, of fairness, of loyalty. As Professor DeSteno has shown, one of the quickest and most effective ways to build that virtuous relationship is to feel and express gratitude towards others.⁴

Our faith is not a faith built on transactions between you and a God you feel indebted to or between you and other people you feel indebted to. Our faith is built on a relationship between you and a God you feel grateful towards, and between you and other people to whom you feel gratitude.

Christianity's great insight is to look at this world squarely in the eye and to recognise that this world is a world of suffering and pain, a world of leprosy and much more besides. If suffering hasn't come to you or to people you love yet, it will. How are you going to cope when it does?

When the darkness comes, and it will come if it hasn't already, the light in that darkness will not be fuelled by what you think people owe you or by what you think God owes you, or by any other sense of indebtedness, the light in the darkness will be fuelled by gratitude.

There is no deal you can cut with God or anyone else that will save you from suffering, or that will make your suffering feel fairer, even handed or balanced when weighed against the virtuous life you have led. There is no deal you can cut with God or anyone at any time that will save you. Salvation in life, and especially in the Christian life, is not found in cutting a deal or in balancing a transaction.

Salvation in this life, the light in the darkness, is found in the spiritual relationship you build with God through the example of Jesus Christ, and by way of that, through the virtuous relationships you build with other people. If you have done that, then gratefully, gracefully, for free, you will feel loved and be able to give love.

⁴ <https://aeon.co/ideas/the-fast-track-to-a-life-well-lived-is-feeling-grateful>