

unity with God and each other

a sermon preached on the
eighteenth sunday after pentecost

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by the reverend colleen clayton

the lections: 2 Kings 5: 1-3, 7-15c; Psalm 111; 2 Timothy 2: 8-15; Luke 17: 11-19

As most of you will know, I have just come back from a pilgrimage to Turkey and Greece, following in the footsteps of St Paul. We had a wonderful time, seeing beautiful scenery, marvelling at the many amazing historic sites, eating fantastic food and enjoying swimming in the Aegean Sea!

During our time in Turkey we visited the Gallipoli Peninsula. Our group included an army chaplain, his wife, who is also a soldier, and another soldier who has seen active service in Afghanistan and is an ordination candidate for the Diocese of Melbourne. Our Turkish guide, Hakan, had himself been in the army for National Service, and his family lost young men defending their country against the invading forces in WWI. This was a particularly significant place for them, and for several others who had family connections with some of the many who died there.

Our group held a short service in the sunshine beside the water at ANZAC Cove, in the place we usually see covered in people on ANZAC Day. The most moving moment for me was when Hakan presented our group with a wreath to lay at the memorial. This had not been planned by the group leaders and it was a gesture of personal generosity that meant a great deal to everyone present.

I was struck by the capacity of everyone there to be united in our humanity; to remember together the costliness of war, to feel together the sorrow of loss and to experience amongst us the preciousness of human life, and the power of love.

This story of friends and enemies and shared humanity, came to mind when I was reflecting on today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus is approached by ten people in dire need of help. They have leprosy and, as a result, are unable to participate fully in the life of their society. Perhaps they have heard about Jesus healing others, or perhaps there is something about him that makes them believe he can help them, or perhaps they are just so desperate that they will try anything. In any case, they call out, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!'

Jesus heals them all. No questions asked, No assessment of their worthiness. No proof of their willingness to live a new life. He just heals them; he returns them to their families and friends, he allows them to begin or renew relationships, to take up their roles in society, to touch the people they love. He makes fullness of life possible for them!

Only one of them returns to make a response, and he is a Samaritan.

I remember in Sunday School being taught this story as a model of the importance of saying thank you. I seem to remember that the 'take home message' was that the person who deserved to be healed by God was the one who was grateful and who said thank you. Of course, this is not at all what the story is about! No one can deserve or earn God's love or healing. These things, and everything else we receive from God, are gifts, given to us as acts of grace precisely because we do not, and cannot, ever deserve or earn God's love.

The really good news is that we don't have to!

The gratitude of the Samaritan is important, but it is only the last of the five responses that person made to God.

First of all, the Samaritan cured of leprosy sees that healing has taken place. In Luke, seeing is never just about eyesight, it is always about insight. There is a difference between seeing and insight; between receiving something and integrating it into our selves. The question for Luke is about the human capacity to see as God sees. Seeing becomes insight when it becomes embodied; when a part of God's truth takes on flesh, as it is lived out in the truth of a person's life.

Next, the healed leper turns back in literal repentance. This person is healed and as a result, completely changes direction. I think this is really worth noticing. So often, we want people to show that they have changed direction and are therefore worthy of being helped. It is not so with God. God's healing is offered with no strings attached. The nine who did not come back were still healed. The exciting thing about the one is the choice, not just to receive the gift of healing, but to allow that healing to be life changing.

Praise of God follows. This is an important part of the recognition of who it is that has brought about this healing. Praise is not the same as thanksgiving. This is not gratitude for the healing that has been received, it is the celebration of the nature of the One who heals, who can bring life out of death.

Praise is followed by worship. Only God is worthy to be worshipped so when the healed Samaritan falls at Jesus' feet, this is a recognition that in Jesus Christ, all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell (paraphrase of Col 1:19).

Finally, the healed person offers gratitude and thanks. This is not the primary message of this story, but it is a part of it. An appropriate ordering of life in relation to God involves recognising God at work, turning towards God, offering praise and worship, and giving thanks for the abundance of God's love.

In two, short verses, Luke gives us a complete picture of how we should respond to God. It is a beautiful and helpful guide to living a holy, God-directed life.

Often, we give our attention to Jesus' healing of leprosy. But for Luke, that is not what matters. Jesus is the Messiah of the Most High God, of course he brings healing and liberation, that is to be expected! What really matters from Luke's point of view is the human response to God's initiative of love. The transformation of the ordinary is more important than focussing on extraordinary experiences. The question for Luke is, what do people do with the gifts they are offered by God? God's gifts are intended to bear fruit. We know that the human response to those gifts has been faithful when we see lives that are fundamentally changed at the level of the ordinary and the everyday, lives that are fruitful and abundant.

All ten people with leprosy received God's gift of healing that day. Only one focused on the source of that healing, responding with praise, worship and gratitude, receiving therefore, not just healing but true wholeness and transformation.

There is sadness in the fact that only one of the ten truly responds to God's gifts. However, the real shock in this story is that the one person who makes a faithful response to God and is therefore truly transformed, is an outsider; a despised, marginalised Samaritan.

There are echoes here of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that story, it is an outsider who demonstrates what love of neighbour really means. The Good Samaritan cares for the man who has been beaten, robbed and left for dead, in a way that any of us in the same circumstances would hope to be treated. In the story of the one in ten, it is a Samaritan who responds to being healed with an outpouring of love for God.

The summary of the Jewish law is, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself'. Luke makes the radical move of expressing the fulfilment of the Law through the actions of an outsider.

For the last two days I have been attending a Christian Meditation Seminar led by Fr Laurence Freeman. He has been speaking about meditation as a means of finding unity with God and with each other. Because God is One, God's call to us is a call to unity. Any intention to divide does not come from God. The work of meditation, Fr Laurence says, is to discover the unity of God within us. We must do this work even in the midst of the disunity within ourselves and within our world. Meditation does not solve problems, but it enables us to come to those problems with hope, reminded of the love of God communicated to us through Jesus.

An important part of Luke's invitation to us in today's Gospel story is that we stretch ourselves beyond a divided way of seeing the world. We expect that the people like us, the people of whom we approve, the people held in positive regard by society, the 'goodies', will be the ones who behave well. Those who are not like us, people of dubious ethics or unsavoury lifestyles, people who society deems to be unworthy in some way, the 'baddies', are the ones that we expect will behave badly. But that is not the way it is; not in the Gospel of Luke and not in life in the twenty-first century.

For us to grow in unity with God, to see as God sees, we need to let go of 'us and them' thinking and realise that beyond this view of the world is God's reality, where us and them, and all the others, are held in one-ness in God. This is the heavenly realm where I can see myself in the other, and I can see the other in myself, and I can see all, held in the love of God.

Let us pray;

Blessed Lord, unity of love,
Grant us to see with insight,
to turn our footsteps towards your love,
and to offer you the praise, worship and gratitude of our lives,
that we may be a part of the transformation of your world.
Through our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.