

“A Transformational Thanksgiving”

1 November 2020 - Led by David Boyd

Welcome & Call To Worship:

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 500 God Of Grace

Prayers of Adoration & Confession: Jennifer Wilson

Reading: Luke 17:11-19

Sermon:

Well, here we are again! Back in lockdown for 6 weeks! Only this time there is no chance of the beautiful weather that we had back in the spring during the first lockdown. All we have to keep us going is the promise that if we “take our medicine like good girls and boys”, there is the prospect of a much less restricted Christmas than would otherwise be possible.

On the face of it, there’s not a lot for which to be thankful. So why look at a text which describes a miraculous healing of ten lepers but whose focus is the thankfulness of one of those healed (and a Samaritan at that) and the rather shocking ingratitude of the other nine? What has this two thousand year-old text have to say that can possibly be relevant to our lockdown misery in Dublin today?

The story is fairly simply told. Jesus, on His way to Jerusalem, travels along the border between Samaria and Galilee when He meets ten people living with leprosy. He heals them and sends them away to the priest to be certified as clean. As they go, one of them realises what has happened, turns back and throws himself at Jesus’ feet in gratitude. Jesus notes that it was the Samaritan, of all people, who showed gratitude, and sends the man on his way, saying “your faith has made you well.”

It is the Samaritan who comes back. The person Luke’s readers would have thought least likely to do so. Yet, here he is. And here we all are: discouraged, feeling isolated, at the mercy of government restrictions and a virus that seems impervious to all of our attempts to get rid of it. Of course, we aren’t in the same situation as the ten lepers in our story. To be completely excluded from society, to be shunned, to be forced to live away from the community, begging for food, would have been an awful existence. So, in a way, life isn’t that bad.

It’s only when we remember what life was like before the pandemic - when we had the freedom to go where we liked, to not have to wear a mask, to hug and to be hugged - that we are reminded of just how much we have lost. But back then - when life was good, when there were no restrictions, when we could go on foreign holidays, remember those, back then - how thankful were we? Probably not very!

In comparison to that, our current situation is hard. To be locked in our homes, to be deprived of contact with friends, to be bombarded with ever more depressing news by 24/7 news channels, to be forbidden from worshipping together face to face – it’s hard. So maybe it’s not that difficult to see ourselves as the lepers in this story.

But, before we get too carried away, let’s take a closer look at the text.

Jesus is making that final fateful journey to Jerusalem and is under no illusions about the destiny that awaits Him there. He is travelling along the border between Samaria and Galilee but finds Himself crossing even more boundaries as He meets up with ten lepers, one of whom is a Samaritan. It's hard to imagine anyone more marginalized than these lepers, especially the Samaritan, doubly marginalized by his race as well as the disease. But marginalized people were drawn to Jesus like a magnet, because they recognized that He cared about them and represented their only hope for an escape from their predicament.

They stand at a distance because of their uncleanness and call out to Him, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" And it's interesting that the only other people who call Jesus "master" in Luke's gospel are the disciples. Jesus' response is immediate: "Go, show yourselves to the priests." This was important because you were not officially healed until the priest had made his inspection and pronounced you "clean." Only then could you return to the community and resume a normal life. So, up until Jesus came along, these poor people were effectively in a never-ending quarantine. Can you imagine what that must have been like?!

But now, their suffering is at an end. As they are on their way to the priest, they realise that they are indeed healed. For nine of them that seems to have meant that getting that all-important, clean bill of health that would let them go home to their families was the only thing in their heads. They are off to the priest's house just as fast as their legs will carry them. They play no further part in the story. All of the focus is now on the Samaritan, because he behaves very differently. As soon as he realises that he has been healed, he turns back, praising God and throwing himself at Jesus' feet in adoration and thanksgiving.

Jesus asks the obvious question: "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (the inference being that the nine who didn't return were Jews.) With their knowledge of God and the Scriptures, surely they should have been the first to turn back praising God and falling at Jesus' feet? After all, back in Ch. 7 when John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?", Jesus replies, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard; The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured..." Obviously, the ability to cure leprosy was an indication of Jesus' identity as Messiah; yet, the significance of what has just happened to them is lost on the nine non-returnees.

Only the Samaritan grasps what this miraculous healing means and just who it is that has blessed them in such a marvellous way. Only he responds in the way that is appropriate, shouting God's praise and prostrating himself at Jesus' feet in joyous thankfulness. Incidentally, the verb for *thank* here is the one used when Jesus thanks God for the bread and the wine at the last supper (22:17,19.) It is the basis for our word *eucharist*.

Jesus responds to the Samaritan's thanks by saying, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." Literally, your faith has saved you! Does that mean that the others will get to the priest and find they haven't been healed, because they failed Jesus' little test? Does Jesus mean it as a comment on all of the people he has just healed? Or is it that there is something else going on? Is Jesus saying that what this Samaritan leper has received goes way beyond physical healing? He alone seems to have made the leap of faith – he sees Jesus for who He is and responds in worship and thankfulness. He is not just healed; his life has been transformed!

The main reason the pandemic has been so earth-shattering for us is our failure to exert any kind of control over it. All sorts of restrictive measures are put in place that seem to hold it in check for a period, but as soon as those restrictions are relaxed, back it comes with a vengeance. Our need for control, to feel we are in charge of our world, is a strong feature of our culture. In previous ages, the world was seen as being largely beyond our control, and therefore the path of wisdom was to learn to live life by accepting the many things beyond human control. We, on the other hand, tend to think that our advances in technology should enable us to arrange things to our satisfaction. However, when something like the Coronavirus comes along, it reveals how illusory our notion of control is, and that is deeply painful for us.

This obsession with control applies not just at a practical level, but at a theological level as well. We come up with a way of thinking about God that explains exactly what God is up to and how God proposes to go about it. Until we have Him all figured out, it is very hard for us to trust God. Perhaps that's because what we really want is to trust our theology, rather than God. We want to trust *ourselves* rather than God. We want God proved to us. We want to be safe and in control.

It's only when we come to the end of ourselves, when, like the ten lepers, we have no other recourse, that we cry out in desperation, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" That's when we find, to our surprise, that God is running towards us with arms outstretched, just like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Even then we can still be reluctant to give up control. We don't, in fact, really want God to be God. We want a genie who will do our bidding and make all the bad things go away. Then, when salvation comes along – a treatment for our illness, a new job, the end of lockdown - we're really pleased, but we don't necessarily let it change us, because we want to stay in control. We want to put the genie back in the bottle and get on with our lives.

The temptation is to be like one of the nine people Jesus healed in the story. They take themselves off to the priest like Jesus says, and, as far as the story goes, go back to their normal lives. They don't seem to have been transformed. Perhaps they weren't pushed to the end of their resources. Perhaps they just can't bring themselves to make the next step and surrender control. They had been healed of an incurable disease, yes! This was really something to celebrate, but the sad thing is that there was so much more on offer. Jesus gave them a disease-free life, but he could have given them an abundant life if they hadn't been so wrapped up in themselves.

So, what made the difference for the Samaritan? Well, I think it was thankfulness. To be thankful is to be open to God, acknowledging who He is and what He has done. We didn't create this sunset, we didn't create our friends, and we didn't create ourselves. Thankfulness lets us see that everything that exists is a gift from God, and even our ability to see that fact is a gift. We want to be self-made people, but our very lives are a gift. God doesn't need us, but God loves us and created us out of that love. To be thankful is to acknowledge that truth about the world. *That* is the correct starting point for engaging with life.

It can be hard. Sometimes we look around and we can find very little to be thankful for, or we fail to be thankful to God because everything, in our humble opinion, should be better. We feel that God has let us down at some point in the past, and so we feel that we are unable to trust Him. But that's the way suffering is. In suffering, we are pushed down into ourselves until something breaks, and all that's left is the basic choice: do we trust God or do we not?

When we finally get free of this pandemic, will we be like the nine who didn't come back? Will we just celebrate the fact that the pandemic is over and go back to our old lives, back to business as usual? Or will we be like the Samaritan and let thankfulness change our perspective on life and open us up to the abundant life that Jesus offers?

This pandemic is a once in a lifetime event, maybe even a once in several lifetimes event. But I can't help feeling that it's also a time of opportunity. It's said that God whispers to us in our pleasures but shouts in our suffering (C.S. Lewis). So it seems to me that God is trying to get everyone's attention right now. He is asking each one of us, "Do you trust Me? Do you dare to give up that control you're so fond of and really trust Me?"

And if we long to say yes, but don't know how, then begin with thankfulness.

Hymn of Reflection: IPH 514 My Heart Is Filled With Thankfulness

Prayers for Others: Ray Speer

Announcements

Closing Hymn: His Mercy Is More

Benediction: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and evermore. Amen.

Discussion & Application:

Thinking Back: When life is good, we tend to forget to give thanks. Take some time to reflect on the past and give God thanks.

Thinking Through: Thanksgiving can be transformational, even when we're in the midst of suffering and waiting, calling out to Jesus for mercy . . . especially then. How can you offer thanksgiving to God in your present circumstances?

Thinking Ahead: What might a response of thankfulness look like in your own life when, God-willing, this pandemic ends? How might we demonstrate our gratitude to God together as a church?

