

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lamentations 1.1-7/*Psalm* 137.1-6/*II Timothy* 1.1-14/*Luke* 17.1-10
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
7 October 2007

Deep Gratitude

~Paul H. Friesen~

For a change no one said to me last weekend that they would be interested to know *how* I was going to talk about today's Scriptures. Instead I was *told* what to preach about. 'Tigers: preach about tigers!' said my four year old. So I double-checked; lions and cheetahs I can find in the Bible, but nothing about Tigers. So I'll just stick to the Bible readings for today's sermon.

But we have a problem. Today's Scriptures seem to have no more to do with Thanksgiving weekend then...well, tigers do. Just when we thought we'd heard about enough doom and gloom from the prophet Jeremiah last month, we have been obligated this morning to hear the *Lamentations of Jeremiah*—for by a long, long tradition they are *his* lamentations, his poems of sorrow. So, we ask, who slipped up when the committee—the international, inter-denominational committee—put together the Fall 2007 cycle of biblical readings—what we call the 'lectionary'? Couldn't they have 'lightened up' a little when it came to the readings for Thanksgiving Sunday?

Here is part of the answer: 'harvest thanksgiving' services are cultural holidays in many parts of the world, but they are all very different and held at different times of the year. On the other hand, our Christian calendar tries to bind together Christians in every land with shared readings, and asks us to share our major Christian celebrations on the same days.

We are one spiritual family—regardless of the politics of our leaders or the cultural customs of our lands, or a particular bishop, or who the wardens or rector happen to be in a particular parish.

For us, Christians, local customs and personal preferences must always take second place to the commitments of our shared Christian family. And today is the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, that great day that marks time every year for Christians by remembering the coming of the Holy Spirit.

But there is another part to the answer about the meaning of today's readings on the Sunday of Thanksgiving Weekend. This is found in the Scriptures, the deepest and oldest and strongest part of our Faith. Our Scriptures tell us that *thankfulness* can't be kept boxed up and only let out one day each year. *Thankfulness*, the Scriptures teach, can be found everywhere and offered anywhere. In fact it is impossible to avoid it as we look through the Bible, the heart of our faith. So I am sure that we can find *thankfulness* in our Scriptures for today.

From one point of view the search is easy enough: thankfulness for the past jumps out at us. The last verse of our reading from *Lamentations* reads like this: 'Jerusalem remembers, in the days of affliction and wandering, all the precious things that were hers in days of old.' No matter how bad things were for the Israelites—the empty city, the smashed-up temple, the deported people—the people of God could be thankful in their memory. They could remember *precious* things—the stories of Abraham, the escape from slavery, the beginnings of their great Kingdom under David, how Jerusalem was once a joyful and splendid city. It was not hard for them to be thankful in their memories.

In today's *psalm* the Israelites who were exiled from their home could remember how precious the songs of their ancestors were—the 'Songs of Zion'. These songs were far too precious to sing to the Babylonians as entertainment, like they were performing monkeys in a circus. These songs from their past were signs of their past joy, signs that they might have joy again. For this they were thankful.

I think we all know how songs bring back precious things to us, and make us thankful for the past—whether the past is two months ago, or two years ago, or twenty years ago, or much, much longer ago, long before our birth. This is, in fact, true thankfulness. We cannot do without it. We might call it *circumstantial thankfulness*—remembering the good times we have enjoyed.

But thankfulness for the past can play tricks on us. It is easy to be selective, to forget the pains as well as the joys that were all mixed up together *in our past*, the good and bad things that in God's mercy made us into who we are today. And when we forget that mixture of experiences we are also tempted to dwell on *present happiness only*. We are tempted to be ungrateful for the fullness of what God has given us right now—both things we love and the things we hate about ourselves, and about our family, about our job, and about our parish. This can blind us to the wonderful ways in which God helps us grow strong, spiritually, both through what we want—and what we don't.

There is another way the past plays tricks on us. We have competitive memories of past thankfulness: which child was favoured by which parent, which family holiday was good and which bad, which form of worship or music was the best. How different and even contradictory these thankful memories turn out to be for different people in the same family or the same church! Our thankful memory might be a painful one for someone else.

So thankfulness for the part of the past that each of us remember is *circumstantial thankfulness*. This thankfulness is very personal, and very strong, and often very emotional. It cannot be denied, nor should it be suppressed. It gives assurance that God is good. And it gives us hope, in hard times, that God will bring good times again.

But we are called by God, throughout the Scriptures, to a deeper and stronger kind of thankfulness once we have been thankful for the past. The Bible teaches that true thankfulness moves beyond individual happiness to a shared gratitude for the deepest good of all. For Christians deeper thankfulness is beyond individual blessings, blessings that we remember as happy circumstances.

In other words, the memories of individual blessings are doorways into a stronger thankfulness that God calls us this morning. *We might as well just call this kind of thankfulness 'deep gratitude'.* The service of Morning Prayer illustrates this with what it gives thanks for—'above all.' It goes this way: 'We...give thee most humble and hearty thanks...for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; *But above all* for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; For the means of grace, And the hope of glory.'¹ What do we mean when we give thanks for 'the redemption of the world...the means of grace...the hope of glory'?

Our Scriptures help us because they are full of references to *deep gratitude*. Christians often meet it in the opening verses of the Apostle Paul's letters to the churches. In the very first of these in the New Testament, *The Epistle to the Romans*, he says, 'First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.' In the very next letter, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, he says, 'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Jesus Christ.'²

In today's Epistle, we meet the same attitude. St. Paul says to his young apprentice, Timothy: 'I am grateful to God ...when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day...I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.'

What should we make of these verses? They give thanks for what we sometimes call 'spiritual blessings'—God's grace and human faith.

The Apostle Paul is *deeply grateful* for God's unconditional love of humanity and the response of faith in his children, the response to God's love that has changed lives for the good. He is *deeply grateful* for Christian lives marked by *spiritual growth*.

Should we be suspicious about *deep, spiritual gratitude*? No more than we should be suspicious of claims that others are thankful for their *circumstances*. Although *deep gratitude* doesn't come with 'facts and figures' it is every bit as real. In Paul's letter to Timothy, the Apostle gives thanks for faith that he has seen in a family tree—in a grandmother, a mother and a son.

We know from the New Testament book of *Acts* that Timothy was the son of a mixed marriage—a Jewish Christian mother and a secular Greek father.³ And we know that St. Paul had a strong emotional attachment to him, especially as he considered Timothy a spiritual son.

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (Toronto: ABC, 1962), p.14-15.

² *Romans* 1.8; *I Corinthians* 1.4. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

³ *Acts* 16.1.

‘Recalling your tears,’ said Paul, ‘I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy.’

In spite of this, we know nothing of how well Timothy’s life had gone to this point—although he certainly seemed to be in need of encouragement in our Epistle. We don’t know if Timothy had healthy finances or prospects of marriage or good health. But Paul was thankful for his faith. That is to say, Paul was grateful for the way in which God was at work in Timothy’s life, and grateful for the way in which Timothy was responding to God’s grace in his own life.

We aren’t given details. But in the New Testament, as we hear it week by week, we discover that looking and listening for the work of God in our lives is the key. God’s grace will always come to us.

There are only two questions: Can we see and hear and feel God’s grace? And what should we do when we see and hear and feel God’s grace?

Paul is grateful, in the Epistle, for the spiritual evidence of God’s grace and Timothy’s response. Timothy wants to grow; he wants to be changed by the unconditional love of God that is coming his way. In this case, Timothy seems to have been challenged by those around him who doubt him and doubt his ministry. But Paul is *deeply grateful* not just for Timothy’s past faith, but for the possibility of future blessings.

He says to Timothy: ‘I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.’ *Deep gratitude* has a future, regardless of uncertain circumstances. *Deep gratitude* prepares us for God’s future grace, in whatever form it comes to us.

This is why, as Christians, we anchor our lives in the thankfulness of the Eucharist. We enter our ‘communion’, our meeting with God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—in thankfulness. And then the Eucharist, our act of thanksgiving for spiritual blessings, helps us to enter the rest of the week in an attitude of *deep gratitude*. It is gratitude for Jesus Christ who gave nothing less than himself—from the cradle to the grave, from the cross to the heavens. It is a spiritual gratitude that will help us meet the circumstances that wait for us, good or bad.

This morning, I would also encourage everyone to offer up thanksgivings during the litany before Holy Communion. Take the opportunity offered for two things. Offer up, silently or aloud, thankfulness for God’s blessings on our circumstances—simple things like family and health and jobs and houses. And let’s also walk through the doorways of these blessings and offer up thanks for the deep signs of God’s love and human faith around us—whatever they might be.