

Prayer - Thanksgiving

A Sermon by Sarah Ashton given at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst on 8/3/2015

Readings: Mark 14 v22-25

Psalm 116 v1-3, 10-17

Nehemiah 12 v27 -31, 38-43

Colossians 3 v12-17

As a parent, a grandparent and a teacher I have spent a great deal of time working on the words 'please' and 'thank you'. They are words that we like to hear when someone asks for something or when they receive something. If someone holds a door open for me I say thank you; if someone does something to help me I say thank you, if someone gives me something I always say or write thank you or at least I hope I do. Sometimes I worry that I haven't said thank you and I find myself apologising only to be told that I had said it earlier. Even young children know what is expected from them, the words 'what do you say?' produce a thank you after the event. When we go on holiday to a country with a different language 'thank you' is one of the words I try to learn (I am not very good at languages at all); somehow it feels better to be giving thanks in the national language when you are abroad. It is polite to respond in this way in our society for anything we are given or that is done for us, however small. Just think how much God has given for us, can we ever say a thank you that is big enough?

When I was taught about prayer, many years ago, I was taught that there are 5 fingers of prayer A -Adoration (on your thumb that opposable digit that makes us different). John spoke about this in his second sermon on prayer when Ps8 spoke of the majesty of God; C-Confession (on your index finger, the one you point and accuse with), this was covered in the last week's sermon; T- Thanksgiving (on the middle finger -it is the longest); S -Supplication (on your ring finger, the one where your love is shown); and lastly for yourself on the little and weakest finger; these two were covered in the first sermon in this series on prayer where we were assured that God knows our needs, but doesn't necessarily address them in the way we hope for.

Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication as initials spell the word ACTS and all our prayers should be reflected in our acts. There are many other versions of this, but this particular one has stayed with me for a long time and I rather like the symbolism that goes with it.

For thanksgiving the idea that it is represented by your longest finger shows that it should be present in all prayer and take time as we have much to be thankful to God for. Paul's letters readily come to mind, he usually starts by thanking God even when he is in prison as is the case at the start of our Epistle today which I will come to later.

In our Gospel reading, we have the words that are so familiar to us. Jesus took the bread, gave thanks and broke it. This almost sounds casual. How often do we say 'thanks' almost without thinking about it. This instance is far from casual and is heavily rooted in Jewish tradition, where before food was shared, the bread was blessed. The head of the family or host took the bread in his hands at every meal and said a prayer of thanksgiving such as 'Blessed art thou, Oh Lord, our God, King of the world, who bringest forth bread from the earth'. Those present would then say 'amen' and the bread would be broken, a fragment consumed by the person who had led the blessing and then passed around for others to do the same. It was God's name that was traditionally being blessed but earlier

in the Gospel, Jesus had changed the emphasis to the food being blessed when, at the feeding of the 4,000 (Mk8), after blessing the bread it says he had a few small fish and gave thanks for them also. Jesus may have done something slightly different to others when he blessed the bread as in the Feeding of the 5,000 (Mk6) it says he looked up to heaven and later on the road to Emmaus, it was His distinctive blessing of the bread that led to the disciples knowing who they had been walking and talking with.

Traditionally in Judaism the final blessing or thanksgiving came at the end of the meal when the head of the house or an important guest would say 'Let us give thanks', take the cup of wine, look at it and say a long thanksgiving before taking a sip of the wine and then passing it round for others to sip..this is the cup of blessing. The words in the Eucharistic prayer say 'after supper he took the cup..'

At his Last Supper Jesus is following Jewish traditions, but he introduces new meanings as he says that the bread is His body and the wine His blood of the new covenant poured out for many. At the time this must have been so baffling for his disciples as they had no idea of what was going to happen in the next 24 hours. Instead of the ordinary thanksgiving a whole new concept was being introduced. This would lead to a new covenant between God and the people.

A covenant is an agreement and the Old Testament is a history of the agreement between God and his chosen people, the Jews. Throughout the Old Testament there are references to the covenant being sealed with blood, whether it be in dreams where God, as a smoking firepot, went between the halves of animals on the ground, or blood from sacrifices poured on to an altar. Jesus is about to bring about the New Agreement/ Covenant between God and all people and it will be sealed with His blood. The thanksgiving or blessings that had always been said would now be Jesus' promise of his real presence with His followers until they are together again in the next world.

We celebrate this promise by receiving the bread and wine in the service that is known by many names, one of them is the Greek word Eucharist which means thanksgiving, so our very presence and participation in this act of worship is part of our prayer of thanksgiving.

The reading from Nehemiah says that two large choirs were formed with the purpose of giving thanks. Our prayers of thanksgiving are not just the words we say; whether we are praying privately or corporately they are expressed in the music and words that we present with energy and feeling. The psalm asks how can we repay God for all that he has given us and talks about making a thank offering.

Today we don't bring animals to the church for sacrifice as our thank offerings take a different form and here I return to the Epistle. Our thank offerings are shown not only in monetary gifts and in time given, but as Paul says in our living our life the way Jesus would like us to: through knowing him, we grow in him and show him to others. We should be clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. This is all part of showing our thanksgiving to God, it is part of our prayer. God was prepared for His Own Son to live on earth as a Man and show us how to live and ultimately to die for us so that we might be forgiven, so our thanksgiving for such a sacrifice means that we need to forgive those around us when necessary and show the love that Jesus did. By doing this, we will experience the peace of Christ. Our thanksgiving should be expressed through our lives, it is not merely an expression of words, it is the mainspring of Christian living, the right motive for all that we do. When we sing as part of our worship it should be with gratitude in our hearts, when we pray it should be with praise and thanksgiving. When we

go out into the community and live our daily lives it should be as an act of thanksgiving for the most wonderful gifts that God has given us and by expressing our thanksgiving in all that we do we will know God's peace.

With all of this to think about no wonder thanksgiving was placed on the longest finger.