

The prayer of a grateful heart

by Rev John Castle

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Readings: **Psalm 116, Luke 17:11-19**

Introduction: Up against it

Which two words cost nothing to say, but make all the difference to the person who receives them, as well as the person who says them? The answer is *Thank you*.

In preparing this sermon, I came across a film made by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at Birmingham University¹, called [Gratitude in Britain](#). In it several people talk about what gratitude means to them. One is a man called Chris who was a successful businessman and director of a company, who had an accident while on holiday in the US from which he nearly died. Three young women took him to a hospital and made arrangements to raise thousands of pounds for his treatment, because he didn't have travel insurance. This is what he said:

"The experience of being so totally helpless, and so unbelievably looked after and cared for and loved just broke a layer of armour that I didn't know was there, and afterwards I've been a different person ever since, because I can never go back to the way I was before that happened."

Chris described his experience as "an epiphany".

Psalm 116 – a song of gratitude

Something like this experience is being described by the writer of Psalm 116. His gratitude towards God for answering his prayer and saving him from death is shown in the opening verses of the psalm:

¹ I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications.

² Because he inclined his ear to me,
therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

From what the psalmist tells us, it seems that his life was in grave danger, probably due to a serious illness. In verses 3 & 4 he says that "the snares of death encompassed me", and that he "suffered distress and anguish", so that he called out "'O LORD, I pray, save my life!'"

Can you remember a time when you were so desperate that you'd have promised God anything to get an answer to your prayers? Perhaps you were very sick or in great danger and thinking you were going to die; perhaps a child got lost and you were

¹ See <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1748/character-education/films>

praying frantically that they would be found; perhaps you were facing redundancy and worried about how you'd meet your huge financial commitments.

I hope that looking back you can tell the story of how you were saved from that situation. What a sense of profound relief when it was all over! Something of that experience seems to be conveyed in verse 7:

Return, O my soul, to your rest,
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.

Facing difficulties

When troubles come, we're often thrown off guard and don't know how to react. We may be overwhelmed by fear, or disorientated and unable to know what to do for the best. As we try to get a grip on ourselves and think rationally, I wonder how much of a difference our faith makes? Do we think to turn to God and ask for his help? The Psalmist says

I kept my faith, even when I said, 'I am greatly afflicted'. (v 10)

I hardly need to point out that the current situation which we are facing due to the Corona virus pandemic is just such a time when we need to turn to God. As things change all around us, and normal patterns of living are disrupted, the only thing that we can be sure of is that God does not change, and he is still in charge. Being a Christian doesn't shield us from difficulties, but it does give us a reason to hope in the face of uncertainty. We may be in for a bumpy ride, but God will give us the strength to hold on, and the grace to overcome our self-centred fears and reach out to others. God's character makes him worthy of our trust, because as verse 5 says,

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful.

Counting our blessings

Research by scientists, such as that done in the University of Birmingham Jubilee Centre, has shown that a grateful attitude has many benefits in terms of people's life experiences and sense of well-being. Counting your blessings makes you aware of the good things you have got, rather than the things you don't have. And research shows that what people are most grateful for is not material benefits but the relationships we have with others.

Mothering Sunday is a time when traditionally we show our appreciation to mothers for their love and care and their self-sacrifice. Of course, for some people this focus on motherhood reminds them of painful experiences – losing a mother, not having had a loving mother, or not having the opportunity to be a mother. It is important that we acknowledge the pain that comes from such experiences, both our own pain and that of others. But all of us can also find things to be grateful for, including those people who have shown us kindness in our sadness, who have believed in us when we felt badly about ourselves, or who have supplied the love and nurture that we have been lacking.

What is more, we can use our experience of the kindness and generosity of others as a source of inspiration for our own lives. In the example I gave earlier, Chris described how his experience of the unconditional love of the people who helped him when he was helpless had made him “a different person”. He even went on to say that although he lost a leg as a result of his accident, the new outlook on life that he gained made even that terrible experience worthwhile.

So what of ourselves? If you want to boost your sense of well-being and develop a more positive and hopeful attitude to life, you might like to do a little exercise. Here are two you could try.

1. Take a piece of paper (or sit at your computer keyboard if that’s what you prefer), and list as many blessings as you can think of that you have received in the past, or enjoy now. And particularly list the people who have shown you kindness, or who play a positive role in your life.
2. Another exercise is to draw a graph representing your life, with time along the bottom and plot your life, indicating significant events. Or you can draw a road with particular events signposted. Then use this as a basis for prayer, thanking God for the positive things that have happened to you and the people who have had a positive influence, and for God’s help at difficult times, whether or not you realised that he was helping you (perhaps through others).

Showing gratitude

Whatever method you use to remind yourself of your blessings, what is important is to follow the example of the Samaritan in the story of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19), who turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him.

The other nine were also healed, and were no doubt profoundly happy about it. But they neglected to show their gratitude. Is there anyone you could show your gratitude to today?

The Psalmist, like the Samaritan who was healed of leprosy, makes a point of pouring out his thanks to God by saying he will

offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the LORD. (v17)

When I worked in Uganda, it was common for people to come up to the altar rail at the end of communion with gifts of money as an offering of thanksgiving for a wedding anniversary, a job promotion or some other reason. I wonder how much more blessed we would be if we showed our gratitude to God in more concrete ways, by offering something back to him, whether a gift of money (to the church or to a charity) or by an act of service, whether within or outside the church community.

One of my favourite hymns goes

When all thy mercies, o my God,
my rising soul surveys,
transported by the view, I'm lost
in wonder love and praise.

We have yet to unleash the power of those two little words, *Thank you*.