



## When duty turns to joy

I wonder what's the first thing you thought – or felt - on hearing that gospel story? Jesus heals ten lepers and only one comes back to say thank you. In some ways it's such a short and obvious story, it's difficult to know what to say. It's a story about healing. And about saying thank you. Exactly a year ago today, I was heading to the operating theatre for back surgery which relieved me of excruciating pain, and I know I will always be extremely grateful to the surgeon. It was Meister Eckhart who wrote: If the only prayer you say in your whole life is "thank you," that would suffice.

I could end there, except when you dig beneath the surface, there's much more to this story than a reminder in good manners. For if you look beyond my very rudimentary synopsis, you'll see that the man who returned to Jesus, returned not just to give thanks but also praise. He came back praising God with a loud voice. I suspect that very description is enough to make many of us uncomfortable. If you look around, we're not generally the type of church that praises God with a loud voice, nor are we prone to particularly demonstrative, some might say "happy clappy", bouts of praise. Yet, if you think about it, giving praise to God and saying thank you is one of the main and most important reasons we are here today.

We say it every week as we gather round the altar. "It is right to give thanks and praise." At the first church I attended regularly – in my early twenties – the priest was a lovely American man whose accent set him a little apart in East Hampshire. One word, which featured each week in the Eucharistic prayer, was particularly distinctive: duty. Except he didn't say duty, he said 'dooty'. "It is our 'dooty' and our joy". I realise now that it's actually the interplay between those two key words, rather than his accent, that has caused that phrase to stick with me through the years. For in that version of the Eucharistic prayer, which we used every week, after the people declare that "It is

right to give God thanks and praise", the celebrant launches into the Eucharistic prayer – addressed directly to God - affirming, "It is indeed right. It is our duty and our joy, at all times and in all places, to give you thanks and praise . . ."

Our duty and our joy. Those two words can seem poles apart. Duty is something we do because we feel we should, because of a sense of obligation, it's something we don't necessarily do out of choice or desire, even though we know it is the 'right' thing to do. We do it even though there are often lots of other things we can think of that we would rather do in any given moment. Duty usually involves a form of discipline, whether it comes from ourselves or others, and sometimes, when that discipline isn't forthcoming, when we fail to do our duty, there can be a sense of guilt, of having let ourselves or others - or God - down, even if there is no obvious or immediate consequence.

Joy is something altogether different. Joy is a sense of deep pleasure, of excitement, of something that is life giving and affirming. We don't usually think of having to drag ourselves unwillingly out of bed, or gird our loins or put on our 'game face' to encounter or experience joy. We don't usually need any persuading or cajoling to do something we know will make us joyful; we throw ourselves into the experience or task willingly, enthusiastically.

Just pause for a moment to think about this last week. What for you has been duty? And what has brought joy? Or how about the week ahead? What are the diary fixtures that you're honouring because you feel or know that you should – even though you would much rather be somewhere else, and what are the things that you're really looking forward to – the 'me moments', the 'downtime', the purely pleasurable?

Those two words, duty and joy are simple yet profound. Let's examine them a little more deeply – let's push them a bit further. For duty can be a very demanding master to serve. Duty can involve sacrifice, often the ultimate sacrifice, as embodied in the famous message sent from HMS Victory by Admiral Nelson at the beginning of the Battle of Trafalgar: "England expects that every man will do his duty."

And joy is something more than pure happiness. Joy is something deeper and less transient. Happiness can be fleeting and dependent on circumstance. Joy is something that has more resilience, that is rooted in faith, in God. Unlike happiness which is purely emotion, joy is described as one of the gifts of the spirit.

Perhaps that is what marks our thankful leper apart from the other nine. They were happy, delighted, excited to find their leprosy gone, whereas he was also joyful, and with that joy came the desire – not the duty, but the desire – to thank the one responsible, to recognise the gift he had been given.

Luke is very clear to point out that there was another distinction between this one leper and the other nine – he was a Samaritan. It is one of the sad ironies of the alienation of leprosy – the hideous disease which made sufferers both social and ritual outcasts from their societies and communities – that it brought sufferers together into bands, regardless of the other factors that would otherwise have kept them apart. The only entry qualification is the disease itself, and all other categories go out of the window. Thus this Samaritan had been part of the band of lepers while they all had the disease, but ironically, once cured, would still be an outcast but in another way. In reality, he couldn't go to the priest to be declared cured, because the priest would not give a Samaritan the time of day.

But, as in many other examples in the Gospels, it is the outcast or outsider, the other - by virtue of gender, religion, social standing - who is not only healed by Jesus, but who acknowledges and gives thanks for the extraordinary gift they've received. For that gift is not only healing, which the other nine have also received, but wholeness. "Get up and go on your way;" says Jesus, "your faith has made you

well." And moreover, in that recognition of faith, of joy and gratitude, there is also relationship. The Samaritan has prostrated himself at the feet and looked into the eyes of the man who healed him. There has been a genuine connection, because he realised that merely to receive was not enough. He came back not out of duty, but out of joy and in doing so, received a spiritual gift and health that most likely will have far outlived his physical health.

Who are the Samaritans in our midst world and society? Who are the outsiders? Who are those who don't belong? On a global scale, we know they are the thousands of refugees, predominantly Syrian, but from many other countries too, who have fled devastating destruction and persecution and undertaken perilous journeys simply to have a chance at life; those who have not just been shunned but actively and violently persecuted. In other places they are the victims of ignorance, prejudice and discrimination. They are the subjects of human trafficking, who are terrified of going to the authorities because they have no documentation. They are the elderly and unwillingly alone who have no one to visit them. They are those in the transgendered community forced to produce ID to determine they use a public toilet which matches their birth gender. They are the men and women and young people who sleep in the shop doorways, basement stairwells and under the bridges in our city. They are the recently released offenders, trying to stay on the straight and narrow away from the familiar routine of life inside.

As Ann Lamott writes in her engaging and often quoted book on prayer, *Help, Thanks, Wow*: "Sin is not the adult bookstore on the corner. It is the hard heart, the lack of generosity, and all the isms, racism and sexism and so forth."

Many of you will know that as a church, we are planning to start up a weekly drop in for refugees. Building on the firm foundations of our winter night shelter, and after collaboration with our neighbours at St Martin-in-the-Fields who already run such a project, the aim is to provide a warm, safe space where those who are trying to build a new life in a strange land with no recourse to public funds, can come not only for practical help – learning English, clothing, filling in forms, advice on where to get

aid – but most importantly, where they can find welcome and companionship and relationship, somewhere, albeit for one morning a week, they can belong.

The Dutch priest and pastor Henri Nouwen wrote some years back that “Probably no word better summarizes the suffering of our times than the word “homeless”. It reveals one of our deepest and most painful conditions, the condition of not having a sense of belonging, of not having a place where we can feel safe, cared for, protected, and loved.”

The weekly drop in will be a significant undertaking, as is the Night Shelter, and we are very clear that both projects find their centre, their grounding, and their inspiration in what we do this morning – in our gathering together around the altar to share in communion. For it is this sacrament which is at the very heart of our life together; this sacred meal in which we remember and give thanks for the pouring out of a life in love for all humankind, this meal in which we come once again, face to face with the overwhelming generosity of God. We come each week as we are, in thick and thin, in good times and bad and in all shades and seasons in between. It is here we come, to give thanks and praise, for we know that even in the tough times, the difficult and painful and scary and despairing times, that here, around this altar, we belong and are loved.

It is in that unconditional, generous love that we find that relationship, that wholeness, that joy that is not dependent on happiness, but on something much deeper and stronger. For this is where duty turns to joy. When we come to give

thanks and praise; when we recognise the many blessings in our lives, when we seek to share those blessings, to invite others to gather around the table and belong, we find joy. Not necessarily exuberant happiness, but something much deeper and longer lasting, something that can encourage and sustain us in times of pain and challenge.

I must admit on a number of Tuesdays evenings in the last few winters, at the end of a working day here, it was a sense of duty that led me downstairs to the Night Shelter when it would have been all too tempting just to head home to a nice warm sofa. And yet, every time, joining together with our guests to play cards, sing songs, tell jokes and share dinner, there has been an unmistakable sense of joy. Not happiness - because how can you be happy when you realise just how random and unfair the world is? - but joy, in the simple act of coming together in a place where we all belong.

It is our duty and our joy. This is the truth we find here at the altar in Christ. For here, as we share the bread and the wine, in that moment of eternal now, we taste that wholeness which is our destiny. That’s the miracle. That’s the transformation. That’s the healing. As St. Paul so rightly recognised in the letter to the Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” So, in Christ, there is no longer ‘dooty’ or joy. They are not poles apart, for in Christ they become one. In Christ, our duty becomes our joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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