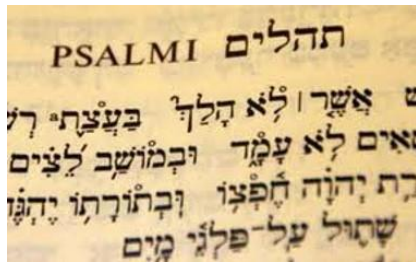


Sermon for the Second Sunday Before Lent

Psalm 136, Matthew 6:25-end

Pour out gratitude in our hearts O Lord, may we always give you thanks. You are always with us. Your love endures forever. Amen.



The Book of Psalms is one of my favourite books in the Bible because it is simple. It is a book of songs, written three thousand years ago by people who had a very special relationship with God. They talked to God as if God was in the room as they were composing their songs. And what I particularly love about the Psalms is that their authors felt they could say anything to God.

Of course, they're not alone in doing that. Another strong example is the Book of Job. One bold message of that book is that you can say anything to God. Throw at him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your disappointment, he can take them all. And like the spiritual giants of the Bible, the authors of the Psalms contend, struggle and debate with God. But they prefer to go away limping, like Jacob, rather than to shut God out.

The Psalms are as many windows into the souls of humans. One of my favourite translations of the Psalms is a French interpretation entitled 'Cris d'Hommes'¹ meaning 'Human cries' – cries of distress, cries of trust, cries of joy.

The author, François Chalet, reinterprets the Psalms for our modern world. For Psalm 136, he writes this introduction:

'Do you have some time tonight? Sit down and think back on your life – your parents, your friends, those who helped you to look differently at people, your partner or spouse, happy times or bad times. Think of those times that might have seemed horrendous at the time, but actually served to shape you and make you stronger. Look back on your sins. Don't you think the Lord was there, with you, and that even your failures, the wrong you did, served a purpose? Of course they did. And of course the Lord was there with you, in the midst of it all. Read the psalm again, and this time, rewrite it all with pieces of your own life.'²

If I were to write my own Psalm 136, it would go a little like this...

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

His love endures forever.

To him who alone does great wonders,

who made the heavens, spread out the earth upon the waters,

¹ Chalet, F., *Cris d'hommes*, collection « A pleine vie », Les Editions Ouvrières, Paris, 1966

² My own translation from the French.

*who made the great lights, the moon and stars to govern the night;
To him who was with me in my darkest hour,
who sent me unexpected friends when I was desperately alone,
who forgives me when I don't want to forgive myself...
His love endures forever.*

Looking back on our lives, we can make long lists of times when, actually, God was there, because we are his beloved children.

Psalm 136 (like Psalm 107, for example) is one of those songs that looks back, remembers what God did for us, recalls the times when we thought God was not there but actually, He was, and it's a song that gives thanks. It's a song of joy and gratitude, rooted in the seriousness and the gravity of our human lives. And we can all sing it – the righteous, the thieves, the criminals – because we are all held close to God's heart, in his love that endures forever.



Knowing that God's love is ever enduring, does it make a difference? Can we start thinking differently when we know and believe in God's love for his children? If we let it sink into our hearts, this knowledge can spark trust in God and a powerful feeling of gratitude.



Trust in God first. It is at the core of the message of Jesus to the crowds sat there all around him as he speaks to them on the mountain. Jesus has just taught people how to pray to the Father – 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name (...) give us today our daily bread'.

And now, he's asking them not to worry about their life.

'Worry' is an interesting verb: it means to trouble oneself, to fret, to be unduly anxious.

Note that Jesus is not trying to minimize the anxiety that some of his listeners might have, perhaps about lack of food, care, clothes, water, animals. He wants to redirect their lives away from the material aspects that are not so important, and back to God. After all, look at the lilies and the birds, they look fabulous, and they have all they need. And aren't humans even more precious to God? Of course, they are.

'Focus on what really matters' Jesus seems to say, and that's 'God's kingdom and his righteousness'. In fact, when you think of it, every time we share means, money, food, care, warmth, clothes, in our community and in the wider world, we lay new bricks of the kingdom of God. And we spark feelings of gratitude. It is a virtuous circle, born in the love of God.

And now, gratitude. Gratitude has been the subject of countless scientific studies. Some focus on the power of ‘thanks’. Receiving gratitude gives a higher level of self-worth.³

Others focus on the effects of a grateful attitude towards life, making us more aware and awake, bringing about better communication, more empathy, stronger relationships, and even resulting in a stronger immune system, better sleep-wake cycles and better overall health.⁴ In psychology, gratitude could be summed up by saying ‘Enjoy the little things. For one day you may look back and realize they were the big things’.

Isn’t that just what Jesus is telling us in our Gospel passage?

Cultivating gratitude can shift our focus, from the petty things to the kingdom of God. But finding gratitude isn’t easy in ordinary times, let alone in times of pandemic and natural disasters. Thinking of these and their thousands of victims can put everything into perspective: when we lose much of what we had, we return to what matters the most to us. Gratitude is seeing the ordinary things in our lives as extraordinary. They are gifts that are good to us and good to share.

Gratitude is also very counter-cultural. It was already at the time of Jesus, which is why he went to the extreme of asking: ‘Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?’ It is still counter-cultural today. In our present culture, we have become consumers and we tend to think that if we have more, or better, or different, we’ll be happier or more grateful. Caught in the trance of consumption, we forget the gifts received from God, the words received from Jesus, the blessings received from the Spirit.

So today, both our Psalm and our Gospel passage are calling us to unlearn what we know and cultivate something different by being aware of false messages and promises, and by focusing on the fundamental truth:

God knows our every need, he is our creator

We need God more than ever

Focusing on Him will transform us for the better

God is with us and for us, he is our heavenly Father

Let us give thanks

His love endures forever

Amen.

³ [The power of ‘thanks’ – Harvard Gazette](#)

⁴ [The Neuroscience of Gratitude and Effects on the Brain \(positivepsychology.com\)](#)



This is the 'Gratitude banner' that we created on the 12th of February with the congregation of the All-Age Service at 10.30. In the sky above a field of birds and lilies wonderfully created by Lynda and John Unwin, we stuck many birds' wings telling of all the things we are grateful for.

We pray to grow in faith and generosity, building the Kingdom of God by sharing what we have with those who have little or nothing, and we pray to grow in gratitude for God who is for us and with us always.