



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Sermon

An Attitude of Gratitude

Num 21:4-9; Eph 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

15th March 2015

© 2015 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

Israel had just had a big victory but so quickly turned to grumbling and discontent.

They had been enslaved; their children murdered yet God gloriously set them free by miraculous events: the plagues of Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea. Three times God had given them water to drink when there was none in the desert. God had provided food daily (the manna) which they only had to pick up. Yet they said, "No bread, no water, we detest this miserable food." What ingratitude!

As the Israelites complained against Moses and God, they found they were being attacked by poisonous snakes.

Suddenly, their attitude changed. From angrily denouncing Moses and God, they came pleading for help. They had in fact repented – changed their minds. And the answer was surprising. Moses was to make a bronze snake and put it up on pole. When they were bitten they had only to look to the snake on the pole and they would live.

Had God taken the snakes away, they would have said, they had gone naturally. Had God provided some antidote, they would have said it was just medicine.

This way the miracle was undeniable. It did not take skill or intelligence to apply. It was not the metal object which saved their lives, but the repentance and trust in God's provision of physical salvation.

I wonder if there is relevance to us in all this. We have experienced the favour of God over this last year. The development of the new evening service, the rapid move to employ Tony, the bold decision to enlarge the Op Shop, the second Short Term Mission trip to Kondoa and the miracles we saw there.

It is easy to forget the blessings we have received. It is easy to lapse into ingratitude. Some are tired and it is easy to get impatient and touchy with each other out of that weariness. Let's not follow the lead of the ungrateful Israelites but remind ourselves of the wonderful things God has done for us and through us. God likes an attitude of gratitude. Do you remember the prophecy which Max brought at the very first service in this church? He told us that God said, "I am pleased with your thanks. So often my people ask me for things and yet forget to thank me afterwards."

In the gospel reading, we heard Jesus liken himself to this bronze snake. What a strange comparison!

What did he say again? "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." But to compare himself with a snake! - with all the connotations of sin and evil associated with it!

What was he saying? He was emphasising the importance of trusting the provision God makes for our salvation. The Israelites were to look to the snake and be saved from physical death. We are to look to Jesus' death in our place and be spiritually saved. He died in your place. You don't have to be intelligent. You don't have to know how he does it – it is a matter of trust for all people.

I think the snake comparison that Jesus makes corresponds with that amazing verse – 2 Corinthians 5:21 “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

God was in Jesus saving us - he so identified with our sin that he became sin. And then the great exchange of the cross, as he became sin so he gave us his righteousness in exchange.

This is a great wonder. That the one who knew no sin would voluntarily become sin to save us – it is enormous, wondrous. As Paul also says, “God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.”

And he doesn't just save us but God raises us with Christ to seat us in heavenly places. In other words, we are appointed to rule with Christ - from the guttermost to the uttermost.

Paul goes on to tell us that we are created to do good works in Jesus Christ. And God has planned those good works already! It is not random. God has already considered what he has prepared for you to do. Doesn't that make you want to be involved with him in it?

Two years ago, the call came very clearly to go over on a short term mission to Kondo. In one week, I preached on the passage in Acts 16 where Paul receives the call, “Come over and help us.” I read two separate advertisements asking for short term mission help based on the same passage. I prayed about where we were to go and an email arrived from Bishop Given asking us to come. Previously, I had had no desire to go to Africa. I thought it was hot, smelly, dirty and dangerous. Once I knew God was calling me, I wanted to go! It is exciting to be involved with God in the good works he has planned for you to do.

So when you are doing something for others where is your focus? Is it on yourself or the other person? Is it on God or yourself? If the good service, the loving actions, the help we are able to give to others is planned by God, if he regards us as coworkers in doing these things then we want to do them for him.

Sometimes when we do things for people they aren't grateful. Well if we are doing it for God as an expression of love to him of thanks to him, in a sense it doesn't matter what response the person gives.

Here is a helpful slogan: “Audience of One.” It means God is your true audience. What you do, you do before him. He is the one you should be concerned about. Don't worry about impressing other people.

The Greek word for grace is *charis*. The word “I thank” is *eucharisteo*. “*Eu*” is a prefix means well or good. Can you see the connection between grace and giving thanks? In fact, *eucharisteo* is used for giving thanks for a meal which we call the grace.

Colossians 3:23-24 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, ²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

So as we volunteer, as we serve others, as we rub up against others, let us have an attitude of gratitude. Every good thing we have flows from God's grace, his generosity.

I read an article written by Jonathan Moores, the current curate of my former church in England. He wrote on grace saying:

It is my experience that we as Christians can fail to reflect our gracious God in the way we treat each other. We can pull people apart who try new things in our services. We can resist new things happening because it's not in our comfort zone and make sure everyone knows about it. Or we can throw our toys out of our prams [when we don't] get our own way. We can stand in that long queue in the shop and criticise those who are causing the hold up. We can be graceless.

Yet we have a faith that is rooted in grace. The whole book of Romans explodes with the grace of God: Rom 3:24 says, we have been justified freely by his grace. This means that we have all forfeited

any right to the love of God, we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. There is nothing that we can do to earn God's love, nothing that we can do to enter a relationship with God.

We have blown it... but that's not where God leaves it. He could have written us all off like a damaged car, he could have thrown us all away, but instead he sent his son to come and take all the stuff that we have done wrong and he bore the penalty for our sin, which is death. Jesus died for us, once and for all. This is grace: God's riches at Christ's expense. ...

This is how we begin as Christians but it's also how we go on as Christians: we still need grace; we still need the power of forgiveness. That means we can have a fresh start with God daily as we become ever aware of the ways that we fail him and blow it. Grace is not about letting each other sin without consequence but it is believing that we can all change and are changing in God's love. We still need grace. Our experience of the Christian life should be one of grace, in how we experience God and in how we experience others.

So how are we all going to contribute to being a community of grace? Listen to the words of this poem:

Ten little Christians standing in a line,
One disliked the pastor, then there were nine.
Nine little Christians stayed up very late,
One slept in on Sunday, then there were eight.
Eight little Christians on their way to heaven,
One took the low road, then there were seven.
Seven little Christians chirping like chicks,
One disliked the music, then there were six.
Six little Christians seemed very much alive,
But one lost his interest, then there were five.
Five little Christians pulling for Heaven's shore,
But one stopped to rest, then there were four.
Four little Christians, each busy as a bee,
One got her feelings hurt, then there were three.
Three little Christians knew what to do,
One joined the sports crowd, then there were two.
Two little Christians, our rhyme is nearly done,
Differed with each other, then there was one.
One little Christians can't do much 'tis true;
Brought his friend to Bible study, then there were two.
Two earnest Christians, each won one more,
That doubled their number, then there were four.
Four sincere Christians worked early and late,
Each won another, then there were eight.
Eight little Christians, if they doubled as before,
In just a few short weeks, we'd have 1,024.
In this little jingle, there's a lesson true,
You belong to the building, or the wrecking crew.