

# For the Welfare of the City

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 13 October, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 18 C

**Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19;**  
**Contemporary Reading: “All people are human”**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZesDv2khsW>

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I've been thinking about times past a lot lately. Especially about past times of saying goodbye to people – saying goodbye after twelve years in New York, six years in Christchurch, twelve years in Wellington and soon, nearly six years in Sydney. Everywhere that I have lived since I finished university in New Zealand, I have made friends...some of those friends have become life-long friends, other friends I'm still aware of, but mostly connected because of Facebook.

There is grief, always grief, in leaving friends behind. But also the reassurance of knowing that when I do meet up with life-long friends, friends who I may not have seen for years because they live so far away, we will pick up our conversation as if it was only yesterday since we had walked and talked and laughed together.

We don't have to have a lot of friends in our lives, though some people do. I am in awe of my sister, Mary, who it seems has never lost touch with a friend that she's made since primary school. I see her intentionally tending and nurturing friendships with people who no longer live in the same city as she does.

Not all of us have that commitment to a large number of friends, but a few deep, sustained friendships are an incredible richness in our lives. In our friendships we understand the blessing of our lives as a mutual giving, from God to us, from us to our friends – and those whom we encounter in our everyday lives.

In the grieving of goodbyes, we also have the opportunity to name our gratitude, and to consider the sacredness in the connection of friendship that enables us to be a blessing in the place where we are – even when it is far from our friends.

In the place where we are, whether at home, or - like the people to whom Jeremiah wrote in exile – in exile in far off Babylon, we are shaped by a story of a God who invites us to seek the welfare of the city where we are, to pray to God on its behalf. For in the welfare of the place where you are, you will find your own welfare.

As our friendships demand attention when there is separation, so too are we called to keep connected to the holy source of life and love, and to other people who are part of our everyday lives, not in a simplistic way that denies that there is sometimes conflict and sometimes injustice.

But refusing to connect with those around us in our everyday lives, whether close friends or not, refusing to be together at a table with others, refusing to converse - is to deny the holy, beloved one, the holy who is luring us into another related, connected way of living.

Today in our liturgy, we have introduced and heard about anti-poverty week. And this is part of the work that we are called to do in the world. Part of the work of peace and justice that is always before us. While elements of our liturgy have picked up on the theme of this week as anti-poverty week - and it is right and important that we should attend to the inequality and economic injustice that have become the norm in neo-liberal, western economies since the nineteen eighties - there are ways of thinking about that that will help us understand, such as hearing the voice in the poem that Cathy has shared with us.

But, there are also ways of thinking about who we are in ourselves and how we relate to others that will give us the strength and the inspiration to address poverty and inequality as important matters in our lives.

I want to talk, now, more about paying attention. About responding with gratitude as one of the spiritual resources that will enable us to be part of a struggle for economic justice, for equality in our land. As part of the way that we might motivate ourselves and one another to address that injustice.

The story from Luke's gospel about the Samaritan leper returning to thank Jesus when he found himself healed, offers a reminder to us that gratitude is not just a matter of being polite, of saying thank you - as I said to Addison - of writing thank you letters to your grandmother when you get a present.

Neither is the healing particularly the point of that story. Though it does remind us that the suffering of those with skin diseases in the ancient world was as much about being excluded from community and temple as it was about the disease itself.

The story, in Luke, connects thankfulness with praising God. The leper returns and thanks Jesus by "*giving glory to God.*" He understood, to use the phrase of contemporary psalmist, Joy Cowley, he understood the 'meaning of (his) life as gift.'

The words of thanks are important. But more so is the turning back, the taking time to connect, the reflecting on the meaning of the moment. I think that this return trip must have been more than a few steps for this man; otherwise, surely, he would have got the others to come back with him; it would have been an easier walk. But, going back involves a detour, a change of plans. And when he meets Jesus again, his actions indicate his joyful heart.

A sense of gratitude is an important wellspring of a generous and well-lived life. Fundamentally, we are indebted to the creativity of God, source of life; to the powers of nature that nourish and sustain us; and to the people who cared for us and protected us when we were young and vulnerable.

We think about the food that we eat, that travels from the earth to those of us who live in cities, through many hands - hands that cultivate, harvest, transport, sell, and prepare it. We recognize that even as adults we rely on the labours of many others to survive.

A sense of gratitude in the midst of that acknowledges our interdependent existence. It is an antidote to the dominant myth of independence and self-sufficiency.

Gratitude also involves respecting the humanity of people we come in contact with. The people at the checkout in the supermarket; the people who serve us coffee. It involves respecting their full humanity, reflecting as we interact with them just for a moment, on the meaning of their lives. And it involves an explicit saying thank you.

It also involves working as hard as we possibly can to ensure that society pays a living wage to the lowest paid workers, and that it enables those without work, those who are unable to work, to live with dignity.

The passage from Luke invites us to reflection on the nature of community and the relationship between Spirit and our lives. Gratitude is found alongside other community sustaining virtues, such as compassion, kindness, and patience. Patience is something that I need to remind myself about, living in a busy city. It is so easy to get caught up in the rush and to fail to stop and acknowledge and give thanks.

Gratitude and the virtues of compassion, kindness and patience are not just about what we do. They connect to the values, stories and meanings upon which we choose to structure our lives.

Living in this way is acting like that Samaritan leper - giving glory to God. This doesn't mean directing our lives and worship to an out-there intervening deity. It means living attentive to our own reality, intimately connected with the source of all that is. And honouring that in ourselves and in the other people we encounter on life's journey.

Thankfulness is a spiritual practice that grows this awareness in us. It is a practice that builds up community - like communities of faith like this one. Practices lead to habits. They build muscle memory. And moment by moment, step by step, our words and our deeds become consonant with our values and beliefs. As Richard Rohr has said, "*we do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.*"

There is a wonderful old Jewish story about thankfulness that reminds us that it is also about perspective on our lives. About how we see and understand the situation in which we find ourselves. There is a man who goes to the rabbi and complains, "*Life is unbearable. There are nine of us, my wife and seven children, living in one room. What can I do?*"

The rabbi answers, "*Take your goat into the room with you.*" The man is incredulous, but the rabbi insists. "*Do as I say and come back in a week.*"

A week later the man comes back looking more distraught than ever. "*We cannot stand it,*" he tells the rabbi. "*The goat is filthy.*" The rabbi then tells him, "*Go home and let the goat out. And come back in a week.*"

A radiant man returns to the rabbi a week later, exclaiming: "*Life is beautiful. We enjoy every minute of it now that there's no goat -- just the nine of us.*" The situation was the same as at first, but now his perception had changed. He saw and understood the blessing that was already there.

This is not a rationale for justifying overcrowding and suffering. There is injustice in the world and in our communities and in our own lives. And of course we should address our complicity; we should challenge the powers, and we should work for change.

But if we only focus on what needs to change, we may miss the blessings that are already present. We may forget to turn back and experience the moments of joy that come with thankfulness.

And I wonder, in adding to this Jewish story, if this attitude of mind may have moved the man from complaint to transformation and he got his complaining kids together and built an extra room.

Thankfulness is not just about good manners. It is about an orientation in life that enables us to appreciate what is good and to engage compassionately to change what is not yet good.

By reframing the events of our lives and including a glimmer of gratitude, we increase our sense of coherence with the world. Such glimmers can lighten our pain and energize us for lives of compassion.

In that Samaritan - and in his act of thanksgiving - we see Jesus teaching an alternative way, subverting the teaching of the ancient law, showing that God is not reached through strict adherence to the temple codes. God is close at hand. God is in your neighbour; God is in an act of compassion; God is in a touch of healing. The kin-dom of God is in the midst of you, take notice.

Saying thanks demands this attention to the moment. It demands our recognition that the present moment is precious, not to be missed.

This recognition of the present moment is the beginning of abundance. Abundance means not counting how much is enough, but just beginning to see what is, and being able to give thanks. It means not rushing off to the next thing, as the nine did, but stopping to take note of the reality of this moment.

Saying thanks grounds us deeply in the present moment, not determined by the past or focused on an unknown future. We are invited to be still, to let go of our stored-up regrets about yesterday and our amped up fears about tomorrow. The practice of thankfulness is an alternative way to live in our world.

So I mark this reflection with my thanks. That as we gather together for worship, for tea and coffee and conversation, as we meet in our annual meeting, we acknowledge that there are challenges and changes ahead - and we name that there is so much for which to be thankful.

For people here; for possibilities that will enable us to share good news; for possibilities that will enable us to be good news - for the city in which we live - for the presence of the living, compassionate, holy God moving us into an unknown future...

For all that is and has been in this faith community over generations. For all the connections that we share with the wider community, with people of other paths and people of other faiths, let us be thankful this day.