

GIVING THANKS

Lent 4 Year B

Num. 21:4-9; Ps. 107:1-3,17-22; Eph. 2:1-10 Jn. 3:14-21

Gladstone 14/03/2021

As you look around you, today, it is not all that hard to see that the world is in pretty bad shape. Perhaps, in our minds we might say something like: This world sure is in a mess—I sure hope God knows what he's doing. There is an inordinate amount of intolerance, hatred, violence and so on (and that's just in the church).

It would be interesting to know if sensible people have ever been more depressed about the human predicament than they are today—particularly in the light of the recent and ongoing pandemic, throughout the world. And I guess, there's a lot to be depressed about, isn't there? Of course, every age and every culture is bound to have a blurred vision of its own problems. This is not surprising, because it's usually too close to them to get them into proper focus. And, of course, every generation has its own prophets of doom.

Nevertheless, for us, it's the media, however we consume it, that enables us to grasp the worldwide extent of contemporary evil—it floods into just about every living room, every night, through the ubiquitous or universal television set. Perhaps it's the constant availability of news, through our media and information technology, which makes our modern world look so dark and gloomy.

In part, it's because of the escalating economic problems we face—population growth, the spoiling of natural resources, inflation, unemployment, hunger. In part, it's the spread of social conflict—racialism, tribalism, the class struggle, the disintegration of family life. And in part, it's the absence, in our communities, of accepted moral guidelines—which, in turn, leads to violence, dishonesty and sexual promiscuity.

It would seem that no matter how progressive or advanced we become, humankind seems to be incapable of managing its own affairs, or of creating a just, free, humane and tranquil society. And there is good reason for this—the Scriptures teach us that it's because humankind is itself fundamentally flawed—at least from the time of the Fall, that is.

Against the gloomy background of our world today, our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians this morning, stands out as being strikingly relevant. Written primarily as a pastoral letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul wants to help his readers understand the true nature of the gospel. In particular, he wants to demonstrate to them (and to us) the power of God, in bringing us from death through sin, into life in him—a process that is meant to generate a response of thanksgiving from us. He does this, here in this passage, by setting up a contrast between who and what we are before we enter into fellowship with Christ and who and what we are after we enter into fellowship with Christ.

The first thing Paul does in this letter, is to affirm that outside of Christ, the human condition is characterised by death. We need to realise that Paul's description of humankind here, is not limited to some decadent tribe or a degraded segment of society, or even the extremely corrupt paganism of his own day. No, this is the biblical diagnosis of fallen humanity in fallen society everywhere. This is Paul's estimate of every person without God. It is the universal human condition.

We, who are dead, then, can only be raised to new life by the power of God. Only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, can we put sin to death and be raised to new life in him. Death is Paul's declaration of everybody's spiritual condition outside Christ. Why? Because we are all trespassers and sinners. We have all rebelled against God.

Now, I want to try a little experiment, here, for a moment. Hands up all those who have ever stolen something or ever told a lie? Well it looks like you all came to the right place today.

So, what do we actually mean by a trespasser or sinner? Well, a trespasser is someone who has gone somewhere s/he shouldn't have. So, it's like, we've taken the muddy road through the neighbour's property. We've moved away from the narrow road of faith that leads to truth and righteousness and have tried to cut our own track through the dangerous scrub.

A sinner, on the other hand, is someone who fails to meet God's standard—and of course, God's standard is perfection. The Greek word literally means "missing the mark." Paul states in his letter to the Romans that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

In other words, we have all failed to meet God's high standard in all areas of our lives.

So, before God, we are both rebels and failures. As a result of this, we are "dead" or "alienated from the life of God"—which is basically the same thing. It's both a paradox and a tragedy that those who were created by God should now be living without God.

But, not only are we "dead" says Paul, we were also "enslaved". It's not enough to say that before Christ, we were merely living in our trespasses and sins. Oh, no! Through allowing ourselves to be influenced by the world that's around us, we've become enslaved by it—we've been sucked in to all the shiny bits that society offers us. The influences of this world are all pervasive, and as a general rule, people tend not to have a mind of their own—rather they surrender themselves to the popular culture of television and glossy magazines. Until Christ liberates us, we are all the same.

Furthermore, we are enslaved by our own passions. We are, most often, our own worst enemy. Now, there's nothing wrong with natural bodily desires—after all, they're natural. It's only when these desires become unbalanced or over emphasised that they become sin. For instance, when the natural desire for food becomes gluttony, we have become enslaved to it. This is true for all forms of addiction. Similarly, sin occurs whenever we think too highly of ourselves. When this occurs we succumb to things like pride, false ambition or malicious thoughts. Whenever we become the centre of our own attention, we become enslaved to our own passions.

And if all that wasn't enough, Paul also says that we were condemned. Paul says that by nature we are children of wrath. The wrath of God is not some vengeful or vindictive characteristic of God—rather, it's the divine reaction to only one situation, namely, evil. Because God is perfect and righteous, he always reacts to evil in the same unchanging, predictable and uncompromising way. We are members of a fallen race and because we are by nature, sinners and because God cannot be a part of sin, we stand condemned before God.

By now, you're probably all feeling pretty depressed—we're dead, we're enslaved and (just for good measure) we're condemned.

But wait, there is good news. You see, God has an answer to our situation. It's called the grace of God and it's exercised through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We, who were once dead in sin are given new life in Christ.

In verse 4, Paul begins with that great declaration: *But God...* These two, short, wonderful words are set against the desperate condition of fallen humanity and point to the graciousness and sovereignty of God. God, out of his great love for us, has shown mercy. We were dead, and dead people do not rise, but God made us alive in Christ. We were slaves to our own passions and desires, but God has raised us up with Christ and set us at God's right hand. Thus, in his grace, God has taken action to reverse our condition in sin.

We have been made alive together with Christ. This, of course, points to the resurrection of Christ, without which we would still be dead in our sins. Just as God has raised Christ from the dead and *because* of Christ's resurrection, we have been raised, by God, from our own spiritual death and have been given new life in Christ. As Christ has ascended to the Father, so, in Christ, we too have been raised into the heavenly places with him. In Christ, we too have access to the throne of grace. And he has made us sit with him in the heavenly places. Not only have we been raised with Christ, we have been given places of honour, with Christ.

These are the things that characterise our Christian faith. We are united as one body, the church, because in all of these things, we are “in Christ”. By virtue of our union with Christ, we have actually shared in his resurrection and ascension and as the church, we continue to participate in his ongoing ministry in the world.

Why has he done it? Why has God bothered to save us? Well, Paul tells us the answer to that question as well: It is “...so that, in the ages to come, God might show the immeasurable riches of his grace.”

What prompted God to act in this way, on our behalf, was not something in us. As we have seen, there is nothing in ourselves that warrants any merit. There is nothing in us that recommends us to God, declaring that we are worthy of salvation. No, what prompted God to act in this way, was something in himself—his own desire to offer us salvation apart from any merit in us. It is because of *his* mercy and love toward us and purely by *his* grace that we have been saved.

In raising and exalting Christ, God demonstrated the greatness of his power, but in raising and exalting us, he has also displayed the immeasurable riches of his grace. And because we are the evidence of God’s grace, it is our task, no, our desire, our passion, to point away from ourselves and to point to God, the One to whom we owe our salvation—through Christ, the One through whom our salvation has been bought.

You see, salvation is not about how good you are. It’s not about how hard you try. It’s about the free gift of God in the person of Jesus Christ, who through his death on the cross, on our behalf and his resurrection, guarantees our new life in him. Though we were dead, yet shall we live. Though we were enslaved to sin, yet shall we know freedom. Though we were under the wrath of God, yet shall we know salvation.

Hence, as Paul says, there can be no boasting on our part, for we offer nothing toward our Salvation—it is purely the gift of God. This we accept by faith—the belief, the trust, the hope—that God who is faithful, has accomplished for us, salvation through Jesus Christ. And for this, we share with the psalmist in songs of thanksgiving:

- ¹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.*
- ² Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble*
- ³ and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.*

To him be all the glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.