

Sermon for Harvest Thanksgiving

The Text: Deuteronomy 8:7-14 & Luke 17:11-19

The Texts:

Deuteronomy 8:7-14

7For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; 8a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; 9a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

10When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. 11Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. 12Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, 13and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, 14then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Luke 17:11

“As Jesus was going to Jerusalem he passed along the border of Samaria and Galilee. 12And as he came into a certain village ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood from afar, 13and they raised up their voice saying ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’ 14And seeing them, Jesus said to them, go, show yourselves to the priests. And as they went, they were cleansed. 15And one of them, seeing that he had been healed, returned with a great voice glorifying God, 16and he fell on face before the feet of Jesus thanking him. And he was a Samaritan. 17And answering, Jesus said: ‘Were not the ten cleansed? But where are the other nine? 18Was no one found to return to give

glory to God except for this foreigner? ¹⁹Jesus said to him, rise, go, your faith has saved you.”

Like a magnificent oil painting, today’s Old Testament reading draws us right into the scenery of brooks and streams. Deep springs gush out into the valleys and hills. Soft, golden tones of wheat and barley fields contrast with the rich and vibrant colours of vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olives and honey. It is a land where bread will not be scarce and there is a rich supply of metals for industry. It is a picture of lavish blessing, a place where freedom and peace can be enjoyed. It could just as well be a picture of the incredible country of Australia.

The picture our text from Deuteronomy paints is a picture of a good land. God promises his people that the land they are about to enter is his gift to them and it will be good. It is a land where there will be an abundant supply of extravagant fare. They will not lack anything. When they eat, they will be satisfied. It will be their very own land after years of oppressive slavery in Egypt. “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, God says. For the Israelites, this promise would have been reminiscent of God’s pronouncement of his creation in the beginning: “And God saw all that he had made *and it was very good*” (Genesis 1:31).

After God tells his people what he is going to give them, he commands them what they must give him. God says: “When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you”. Why are the people to praise God? Does he need their thanks and praise? God *is* totally worthy of our thanks and praise—but he doesn’t *need* it. *We* need to thank and praise God. On this Thanksgiving Sunday we might ask why thanksgiving in our daily life is so important.

When we say thank you it is usually in response to the help and gifting from another. When we give thanks we acknowledge that we are dependent on another and especially God. Thanksgiving guards us from the sense that we have a right to things, as marketers constantly seduce us to believe—the same lie that Adam and Eve fell for in the Garden of Eden, which resulted in sin corrupting the perfect goodness of what God had created.

Thanksgiving guards us from the prideful notion we can be the architect of our lives. Without thanksgiving we lose perspective of all that God has

given us, and how much we need his gifts; and that our very breath is dependent on him. We risk looking at what we don't have; what we think we have missed out on, and our focus drifts away from Christ in whom God has lavished his riches from heaven upon us. And so God says to his people today:

Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Thanksgiving helps us to remember God and his goodness rather than forgetting him. This forgetting and remembering is not just mental recollection, but active; it is a faithful *doing*.

We see that most clearly in Genesis 8: *“But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky”* (Genesis 8:1-2).

God didn't have a so-called 'senior's moment' and forget about Noah and then one day suddenly recall in his mind: “Oh no! Noah!!! I'd better turn off the taps!” God remembered Noah—he acted faithfully according to his promise of saving his family and the animals—he sent a wind over the earth and the waters receded and the floodgates of heavens closed and the rain stopped falling.

So when God says to us today: “Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God”, God is not just calling us to remember him with our minds, he is calling us to faithfully follow him; to “fear, love and trust him above anything else”, as Luther explains the first commandment.

Nine out of ten people had forgotten God in today's Gospel reading. As Jesus is drawing nearer to Jerusalem, he passes along the border between Samaria and Galilee and enters a town where he is met by ten men suffering from leprosy—a highly infectious skin disease which in

Jesus' day made those suffering from it ceremonially unclean, separating them from those who were 'clean' in God's presence.

We hear from Numbers 5 that any Israelite who was ceremonially unclean with the disease was to be sent outside of the camp where they would live in tents or huts so as to avoid contaminating the people, and go through a comprehensive purification ritual which God instituted in Leviticus 14. At the end of this, when they had been cleansed, the person was to go to the priest and bring with them three lambs and a grain offering to be sacrificed. In this way the priest would make atonement before the LORD on behalf of the person being cleansed.

These ten suffering from leprosy somehow and somewhere must have heard word that Jesus had cured others of this same disease. Standing from afar to maintain the required distance, they shout: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" It is the cry of those who have no other hope. Nothing to bring or give, but they can only beg for help.

When Jesus sees those who are begging him for his mercy, he conforms to the ceremonial code in Leviticus by sending the lepers to show themselves to the priests. How surprised they must have been. They might have objected in their minds that it didn't make any sense to go to Jerusalem to present themselves to the priests in the condition they were in. But their trust in Jesus was strong enough that they didn't listen to their reason. Instead, believing that there was a promise contained in Jesus' command, they set out for Jerusalem. Leprous as they were, these men were to go to the priest like clean men to be pronounced clean. And as they headed for Jerusalem to see the priests they were cured! That which had separated them from society, family, home and the worship of God in the Temple was ended!

Jesus wanted them to look beyond the miracle and focus on who was the worker of it. He desired to advance their faith to trust him for something even more important than physical healing and cleansing. His power and authority over the laws of nature by simply speaking demonstrated that he is truly the Son of God, the one who spoke his good creation into existence. Jesus' miracle of healing these leprous men was to point ahead to his work of cleansing the world from the leprosy of sin with the outpouring of his blood on the Cross.

One of the lepers, seeing that he had been healed, returned with a great voice glorifying God, and he fell on face before the feet of Jesus thanking him. And he was a Samaritan.

Those from Samaria were held in the highest contempt. They were despised, cursed publicly in the synagogue with the prayer that they might have no part in the resurrection of life. Marriage with them was prohibited, and to eat their food was considered equal to eating pig's flesh—an abomination for the Jews. So the boundary between Samaria and Galilee along which Jesus travelled not only represented a geographical division, but a boundary between social and spiritual inclusion and exclusion.

Yet it is this Samaritan who remembers Jesus. He remembers Jesus by returning to him to offer praise and thanksgiving, worship and devotion—because he recognised that here, at the feet of Jesus, he was truly in the presence of a saving and merciful God. He wanted to know Jesus and be his friend. He wanted to receive the greater healing Jesus had for him—forgiveness of sin and blessing. And God says to him: “Rise, go, your faith has saved you.” (the word for healing can also mean salvation). Where were the other nine? They weren't there to receive that pronouncement.

Jesus wants us to see ourselves in this reading. *We* were those far off. *We* were outside the boundary marking those who are ceremonially clean. In our natural state we weren't just ill with leprosy, or even dying. We were spiritually dead. *We* did not know God in Christ. But it was while we were unable to remember God that he remembered us. It was while we were spiritually dead in sin that God sent Christ into the world and to the Cross for us, where he crossed the boundary between 'clean' and 'unclean' by taking our place on the Cross.

There he remembered us by taking upon himself the leprosy of our sin and exchanging it for his righteousness. This is a reality for each one of us in our baptism, where Christ united us, those who were far off from God, to his own death and resurrection, so that we will certainly share in it as the Father's own dearly loved children. For all of this, Jesus invites us to recognise that there is nothing within ourselves to help us, but simply a voice that calls out, 'Lord have mercy'.

And God does show us mercy. Baptised into Christ, God will never forget us or forsake us, no matter what life holds for us today, tomorrow and in the future. He will never forget us but he will show his compassion and mercy to us. He will be our help always, for in Christ he has already showered his blessings upon us.

In Christ he is bringing us into a good land; a land even better than the one pictured in Deuteronomy. He is bringing us into our heavenly homeland; indeed through faith alone in Christ it is ours already, only possible because of the Father's extravagant love for us.

Amen.