

## Psalm 100

Until very recently, my strong minded little girl would not say “thank you!” We all know of course, how important it is to be polite, and to say thank you to a person when they get something for you. But she refused. And in this she’s completely different from the boys. Each of my three boys would march up to me, and say “can I have a drink please.” Drinks given. Thank you’s said. Job done. Everybody’s happy.

And then there was Alice. Instead of asking for a drink, she will first say, “Daddy, I’m thirsty.” She already has her eye on the drink, and she knows what she wants but I have to drag it out of her. “So what do you need if you’re thirsty?” “A drink.” “Well?” “Daddy can I have a drink?” Raise eyebrows. “Daddy can I have a drink please?”

So I pour her the drink, and what does she do? She takes the drink and walks off. “Alice, haven’t you forgotten something?” And she just looks back at me and narrows her eyes. “I’ve got my drink now, what’s he going to do?” “Alice... what do you say?” And the cheeky little monkey just stares me out. “What do you say?” ... nothing... so I remove the glass of milk from her hands and put it back in the fridge.

And so the fireworks begin. Screaming, crying, lamentation, at high pitch. So I point out of the kitchen. Stamp stamp stamp, to the bottom of the stairs where she parks herself. And so I carry on sorting the brothers out, and ten minutes have passed before I realise Alice isn’t there. And there she is, still sat there at the bottom of the stairs, still frowning – still thinking if she sulks long enough, she’s get her drink. Needless to say, a few such experiences, and eventually she learns that this strategy is not going to work – and for a little bundle of blonde pink girliness, it’s a lesson I’d rather she learned sooner than later.

All that drama, just because of a refusal to say thank you! What is it, to say thank you to a person? Isn’t it just one of those bizarre social transactions of English etiquette. “Mind your Ps and Qs – your pleases and thank yous.” What is really going on with thanksgiving?

The psalm we have heard, psalm 100, is fundamentally a psalm of thanksgiving. But it doesn’t look much like Victorian English etiquette. To begin with, there is nothing specific for which we are instructed to give thanks. I’m not saying that elsewhere in Scripture there is not, nor even that elsewhere in the psalms, we are not called to remember God’s great acts and to offer our gratitude for them. But here, in this psalm, there is something other than – God’s done something kind for you, so the least he deserves is your gratitude.

There is nothing in this psalm, no act, for which we are invited to give thanks. Nothing about what God has done in the history of Israel, nothing about what he has done for the writer of the psalm, and nothing generally about the good things that God might do for an individual – and yet – we are told to give thanks!

The psalm contains famous words, that are used frequently in Christian liturgies as call to worship: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise”. Surely, there is something more to this than a set of polite transactions we must complete before God is happy with the people stood in front of him.

The trouble is, the idea of saying thank you, the concept of gratitude and thanksgiving, are words which have meanings that we think we already understand. We learn these as we learn

language and environment, and these things in turn tend to shape the way we understand God. And yet, part of what happens in worship is supposed to concern the way that God shapes us.

Maybe we could look at the word for grace in more depth – it is from here that we get the word gratitude – our response to grace. Because grace is not simply one person being kind to another person who does not necessarily deserve it. Grace is something disturbing, confrontational, stopping us in our tracks, questioning who we are, challenging our own self-sufficiency. Grace comes to us so utterly from beyond ourselves, when we receive it, it pulls us up short – pulls the rug from under our feet – and leaves us with a new understanding of who we are.

Now, when thanksgiving is understood as our response to utter, unmerited, revolutionary grace – then we see it as more than a social transaction. Thanksgiving now, has the effect of changing who we are, how we see the world and how we relate to it! In the Psalm, there is no hint of saying thank you to God because he has done nice things to us. Instead, thanksgiving is a response to knowing who we are. The psalmist orders us to “Know” that we are his flock, the sheep of his pasture.

The trouble is, it is easy for Christians to keep all the language of thanksgiving, and have no grasp whatsoever of what lies at the heart. We give thanks to God when nice things happen to us, and when nice things do not happen to us, we don’t give thanks. Who wants to give thanks when unpleasant things happen? Surely, the only people who thank God when something awful has happened to them, are spiritually deformed and socially maladjusted merchants of piety unable to cope with harsh reality?

But when we understand thanksgiving differently – when we understand it as a response to God’s grace, in response to what God is doing in the world – perhaps we can begin to see why saying thank you genuinely, means the sacrifice of our actual deeply-seated human pride. I don’t just mean pride as a social convention in a culture that treasures modesty. I mean pride as our resistance to what God is going in the world and in our lives.

Understood properly, thanksgiving hurts. Often it results in having a new, perhaps even unwelcome picture of who you are. Often it means that when you learn to give thanks, not only for the nice things he has done, but for the awful things that can happen to us, a different kind of person emerges from the experience.

I preached once about consumerism, in a rough church in Watts, Los Angeles, not long after major riots had happened there. It was a small, multi-racial church, and I was the only white person there. And we made the sermon ‘interactive’. And this one woman spoke – whose house had been burgled that week. And she stood up and said, “I thank God that my house was burgled. I was too attached to that damn stuff anyway...”

Now you know the difference between superficial, transactional piety – and genuine thanksgiving when you see it. And as that woman spoke, she radiated some beauty that could not be named. Yes, I’m sure that kind of thing can be faked – yes, we’d like to imagine that most Christians would respond this way. But this was a woman well known to all those around her – and there was a maturity, a simplicity, and a straightforward, beautiful authenticity in this act of thanksgiving – and it was a profoundly liturgical act. Infinitely more meaningful, I think, than the sophisticated liturgical habits of thanksgiving we often see in our churches.

And yet, even when hearing this kind of story – we can think - , great – well, let’s learn from that and now go and apply to our lives! By the time we draw that kind of conclusion – we have already mis-heard the story. You can’t just decide to give thanksgiving. It is a habit, a discipline, an art that is learned in course of Christian discipleship – in the community of God’s people.

That is why the psalm calls us to thanksgiving as a regular part of our worship – so that our ways of worshipping and of relating to people are gradually transformed. That is why, it is important for my little girl to learn that the world does not owe her good things.

It is important for her not to grow up with this dysfunctional view of herself and the world. But equally, there is more to learn in thanksgiving than mere polite transactions.

There are ways of learning gratitude, but whether in life or in worship, they come only by relating well to another. Be it the person in front of us or the God who sustains us. Forget about fixing the world, forget about changing ourselves and solving the world’s problems, ridding society of its evils, voting for the right party. Forget about fixing a broken world.

The psalmist would look at our world, deeply aware of the social, economic, ecological injustices that plague it. And this psalmist would say that the place to start is learning thanksgiving. Because if we learn thanksgiving well, there will be , unpredictable, unimaginable, and unstoppable repercussions.

Enter now his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.

She'd approached me, "Daddy, can I have a glass of milk."