

Thankless ?

2 10 16

O God, forasmuch as without you
we are not able to please you:
mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit
may in all things direct and rule our hearts.

Our text may be found in today's gospel reading, Luke chapter 17 and verse 10:

'We have done only what we ought to have done.'

One of the first things I learnt as a teacher was to say thank you. It was one evening in the weeks running up to Christmas 1973, my first term as a probationary teacher at Davenant Foundation Grammar School for Boys in Loughton in Essex. After a school concert, a group of staff was having a drink in the Gunmakers' Arms with the Head Master, Roy Smith. What surprised me was not only did the Head know that I was in charge of the First Year Rugby Team but that he should thank me for turning out on a Saturday to referee their matches. Thereafter, I always made a point of trying to remember to thank folk for what they'd done.

So today's gospel comes as a bit of a surprise when Jesus tells the Twelve not to expect to be thanked for what is, after all, their duty. Our text which concludes the passage baldly states this simple truth: **'We have done only what we ought to have done.'**

And here is a tension between what we should expect to hear and what is good to hear. I know personally how encouraging it is to be thanked and how good it is to be recognised and appreciated for what we do. So what is the world, the word picture, that Jesus uses to convey this deep, spiritual truth ?

Simply, his world is one not common to our experience in the second half of the 20th century in Europe or here, in the second decade of the 21st century in France – it is one of servants and slaves. Servants are paid to a job – to serve their employers. Slaves are owned, the property of their master. Both do what they do because it is part of the right order of the society in which they live. That said, I guess I did have a mum who cooked and cleaned, washed and ironed for me, and generally left me free to do the things I needed to do as a boy; and now I do have a *femme de ménage* who saves me time by keeping my flat clean. But neither was/is a slave who under the law has no free will. In Luke's gospel, the picture Jesus is presenting is one of a hard-working slave who having toiled all day in the field is now expected to prepare a meal for his master before he himself had a chance to sit down to eat. I'm not sure I'd want my cook to double up as a farm labourer but essentially the picture is one of proper order where the slave waits on his master, putting the master's needs first before his own. It is a picture of duty, of doing what is right because it's right, putting others before self. Now, though slavery is not what we accept any more, the notion of service, of duty, of doing what is right because it is right, is fundamentally Christian. And Jesus' simple message to us today is don't expect to be thanked for doing what we ought to be doing.

Okay, I can appreciate the logic and it is neatly expressed in a prayer I love by St Richard of Chichester in the phrase 'to labour and to ask for no reward save that of knowing that we do thy will.' But, instinctively, I know in my heart that we are encouraged and motivated by being recognised for what we do. That is why a simple thank you can be worth its weight in gold.

But let me end with today's sermon with a snippet from next week's gospel from Luke 17 v11 - 19 - the next nine verses following immediately on from today's gospel. It's the story of the miracle of the healing of the ten lepers, only one of whom, a Samaritan, rushes back to thank Jesus for curing him of this dreaded skin disease. It is the Samaritan's expression of gratitude that earns Jesus' approbation because he has taken the time and the trouble to come back to thank God for healing him.

So even though we should not expect thanks, expect to be thanked for doing what is right, perhaps it is right for each one of us to say thank you - what do you think? Thank you for listening!

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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G: Sermons 34 :Thankless

