

GRATITUDE

Sermon at the Eucharist on the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Collect & Readings: Book of Common Prayer

IT'S a gospel reading about gratitude: about the one out of ten lepers who, having found healing from Jesus, remembered to give thanks. We can probably see ourselves in this story. We know how much easier it is to ask, and how much easier it is to grumble, than it is to say thank-you. The nine lepers, in their new-found freedom, their new-found reception into the life of the community and their new-found reunion with friends and families, could not find the time to thank the Lord who had given them this freedom; and we can't blame them because we know that we have too often behaved like that.

The gratitude of the one leper is in my mind today, as I preside and preach at this 8 o'clock service for the last time before I move away from Worcester. Gratitude for all that God has given me, in these years in Worcester; and gratitude for all those people, inside and outside the Cathedral community, through whom I have been so blessed. But the ingratitude of the nine lepers is in my mind as well, because I know that there have been so many times when I have failed to say thank-you, and for that I am sorry.

St Luke, writing his gospel in Greek, tells us that the leper *eucharistēsan* Jesus – he thanked him. And this is not surprising, because *eucharisto* is the ordinary Greek word for saying thank-you, even in modern Greek today. But we cannot hear that word without being mindful of how *we* use it for this Sacrament of the Holy Communion, this giving of thanks, this Eucharist.

'Let us give thanks unto our Lord God', we say at the beginning of the eucharistic prayer. The Sacrament is made homely by calling it by an everyday word; but the everyday word is made awesome by connecting it to the Sacrament. So the grace of God is mediated to us through a hundred humble blessings every day; and those humble blessings are made holy by the God who gives them.

Each time we come to the Holy Communion, we come to give thanks – to make Eucharist – and we stand in the place of the one who, ‘when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at Jesus’ feet, giving him thanks’. And the Lord says to us, as he said to him, ‘Arise, go thy way, thy faith hath made thee whole’.

Preached at the Eucharist in Worcester Cathedral at 8 o'clock on Sunday 10 September 2023.

© Peter Atkinson 2023.

JESUS

Sermon at the Eucharist on the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Readings: Micah 5.2-4; Psalm 131; Acts 1.12-1; Luke 1.39-47.

A thousand years ago, St Oswald built a new cathedral on this site, and brought in Benedictine monks to serve it, and dedicated it to the Blessed Virgin Mary; a popular dedication among our Anglo-Saxon ancestors, who had great devotion to Our Lady. And thereafter, the feast of Our Lady's birthday, celebrated (for want of a better date) on the eighth of September or the nearest Sunday, was kept as the patronal festival of this Cathedral Church – this Cathedral Church of Christ and the Blessed Mary the Virgin of Worcester. The saints of Worcester, and the feast of Our Lady, and the history of this place, all make today, for me, a moving moment to take my farewell. I am also mightily relieved not to be preaching on the gospel text which we would otherwise have had on this Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity: it's the one about taking your brother on one side and telling him his faults. I can see that there might have been a queue.

This building, and its patron saint, and all its long and inspiring history, tell but one story, the story of Jesus. The saints are only saints because they show us Jesus. The Blessed Virgin has but one role in the gospels: to bring Jesus into the world and bring the world to him. This building lacks all meaning or purpose unless it is the place where Jesus is encountered, known, worshipped, and

followed. And if I bring myself into this sermon, it is only to tell you of my long friendship with our Lord Jesus Christ.

I was born into a family in which Jesus was known and loved. My family belonged to that part of the Christian church in which a personal commitment to Christ, deliberately decided upon and consciously made, was valued highly; perhaps too highly; but all the same, as a child, in the course of a children's evangelistic mission, I made that commitment. I will not have it said that a child cannot make that decision; I did, and it has held good for more than sixty years.

Having been baptised as a baby, I was confirmed as a teenager. I made my communion for the first time, and have done so regularly since then. My understanding of the eucharist has deepened over the years, deepened certainly to the point of knowing that one will never exhaust its meaning or importance. So too has my understanding of intercessory prayer, which is always a struggle, but always seems a struggle worth making.

Later, I made other discoveries. I became aware that there are people called to a life of contemplative prayer, singly or in communities. And so I discovered the monastic tradition, not as an historical phenomenon but as a living reality; and some years ago I became what is called an 'oblate' of the Benedictine order; better described, perhaps, as a hanger-on, or someone who hopes to be a better Christian for sheltering under the wing of the great Benedictine family. Which has been a source of encouragement and inspiration to me, in these years in which I have sat in the seat of the Priors of this great Benedictine Church.

But all these discoveries in the course of my Christian life have only been re-discoveries of Jesus. The more I grew in understanding of the eucharist, the closer I drew to the one who said, 'Do this in memory of me'. The more I explored the possibilities of prayer, the closer I drew to the one who spent his nights praying in the hills and in the garden of Gethsemane. The more aware I became of the monastic tradition, the more I was reminded of the Lord who called at least some of his disciples to leave everything and follow him.

There's a salutary story in the gospels about the disciples of Jesus meeting someone who also claimed to be a follower of Jesus, but was not 'one of them'. The disciples wanted to put a stop to him, but Jesus said that those who were not against them were for them. It took me many years to see the point of this story, but gradually it opened my eyes to other authentic (though to me unfamiliar) ways of being Christian: Christians of other churches, and Christ-like disciples in other religious traditions or no obvious religion at all. The accidents of my career have brought me into close encounter with both Roman Catholicism and German Lutheranism – and both Churches are part of our celebrations today. I would like to spend more time exploring the worlds of Eastern Orthodoxy, Quakerism, and the very different and vibrant Anglicanisms of Africa. And in all these ways, I have drawn closer to the one who told his disciples not to draw the boundaries of 'us' too tightly.

The tradition in which I was brought up did not have a very developed social conscience. The world was 'out there', and somewhere best avoided. But the more I explored the mystery of the living Jesus, the more I understood that the life of the world, and social ethics, and the interrelation of faith and politics, are all inescapable for one who follows Jesus.

A priest meets many wonderful people, whose depth of spirituality, humility, and faith, far exceed their own. But a priest also meets wicked people, and is painfully aware that if Christianity is reduced to nothing but kindness and tolerance and good manners, it has nothing to say to the depths of real evil in the world. Wickedness is sometimes present in the church; which is only to be expected, because there are seeds of wickedness in all of us, and sometimes those seeds take root and bear fruit in action. So to be a priest is to be the publicly-accredited representative of a body which is sometimes publicly *discredited*, whether by the actions of individuals or by the collective prejudices of the institution. There are moments for any priest, as there must be moments for any Christian, when following Jesus and following the Church come acutely into conflict.

But a parting of the ways between Jesus and the Church must always be a theological last resort. Jesus assembled his struggling group of disciples and constituted them as his Church. Jesus, as St Paul says, loved the Church and gave himself for it. That is not to excuse the faults of the Church or the faithlessness of some of its members; for Jesus often reproached his followers for their faithlessness. But it is to be aware of the very great spiritual danger of setting oneself above the Church which Jesus loves and for which he died. And I humbly mention in passing that just as I was baptised and confirmed in the Anglican fold, and my faith has been nourished within it, so I pray for the grace to live and die as a priest of the Church of England.

Which brings me to a final, and slightly whimsical, observation. When, a thousand years ago, St Oswald built a new cathedral on this site and consecrated it to the Blessed Virgin, he was exercising an extraordinary ministry simultaneously as bishop of Worcester and archbishop of York. A few days ago I ceased to be licensed as a priest of the diocese of Worcester and was given what is known as 'permission to officiate' in the diocese of York. I am touched to think that I am merely moving from the sunny downlands to the chilly uplands of what was once all part of St Oswald's jurisdiction. (And Oswald, as we know, left his heart in Worcester.)

But far more importantly (and less whimsically) than that, wherever we live, or serve, or worship, we are within the fellowship of the saints; in the fellowship of Mary who brings Jesus to the world and who points the world to Jesus; and in communion with Jesus, who is the Saviour of us all.

A Valedictory Sermon preached at the Sung Eucharist in Worcester Cathedral on Sunday 10 September 2023

© Peter Atkinson 2023.

THIS CATHEDRAL

Address at Evensong

WHEN a dean takes their leave of the community in which they have spent a period of years, they find that there is a very large number of people to whom they wish to bid farewell. Over recent weeks I have received many messages from many different parts of the community, well beyond that number of people we refer to as the 'Cathedral community' or the 'Cathedral congregation'. And I have appreciated, not only the kindness of those messages, but the sense that this Cathedral does indeed stand at the heart of this City and County, as well as this Diocese, of Worcester.

Your presence, Lord-Lieutenant, and that of your predecessor, as the Sovereign's representative in the County, reminds us of the royal occasions of recent years; not only the events of a year ago, as we mourned the Queen and marked the accession of the King, but also the visit of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh in the year of the Diamond Jubilee. We have welcomed King Charles here in his days as Prince of Wales; and no doubt he will come again as King.

It is not only the royal occasions, but also the events in the life of the County which we have marked here: services for the County Council and for the Mercian Regiment; memorial services for many Worcestershire figures, among them that for Tom Graveney at which the late Sir Michael Parkinson spoke.

Your presence, High Sheriff, and that of so many of your predecessors, coupled with the greetings of the Judiciary, reminds us of the Cathedral's happy relations with judges, magistrates, police, and the prison service, marked by two annual celebrations which have grown in recent years – the Judges Service, and the service to mark Prisons Sunday.

Your presence, Mr Mayor, and that of Council officers, and of so many of your predecessors (though not, sadly, of our late friend Andy Roberts) speaks of the centuries-old intertwining of the life of this Cathedral and that of the Faithful City. A significant part of the Cathedral's engagement in the life of the City is the

care of those on its margins – whether in the foundation of St Oswald's Hospital a thousand years ago, or in the work of the Maggs Day Centre today.

This Cathedral stood in the middle of the battle which ended the English Civil War, from which our present constitution of blended monarchy and parliament gradually and painfully emerged. Fittingly we have the grave of a good man who was prime minister as well as a bad man who was king; and today we welcome past and present Parliamentarians, from both Houses of Parliament, as well as members of all the mainstream parties.

This Cathedral, from the days of the medieval chroniclers and their famous library, has been a home of learning; and that is a calling we continue today, through the King's School; through the other schools of the City, so many of which have annual events here; through the church schools of the Diocese; and through the Cathedral's own learning programme, based in the recently restored Undercroft. And here I mention especially the University of Worcester, a partner-institution and very much a friend, represented here today, and in this coming week holding its graduation ceremonies here, which is so important a week in their calendar and ours.

A Cathedral, by definition, is the seat of the Bishop and the mother church of the Diocese; and I gladly acknowledge the presence of members of the College of Canons, past and present, and other clergy and laypeople from across the Diocese. But no Cathedral is the *preserve* of an Anglican Dean and Chapter; to extend hands of friendship to other Christian communities is part of our mission; and I am delighted to welcome the Auxiliary Bishop in the Archdiocese of Birmingham, who is here not only to represent the Archbishop, but also in a more personal capacity, as he and I once studied theology together in a far off place called Rome.

Our diocesan links with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Central Germany, and with the great Cathedral church of Magdeburg, have deepened over the years. We have marked each other's great occasions, we have sorrowed together over the political events of recent years, and we are agreed that in today's world bonds of European friendship must be *all the more* nurtured and

encouraged. The passage from the Song of Songs, which the Domprediger read, told of the love of God we share in the house of the Lord.

A Cathedral is not the *preserve* of the Dean and Chapter, but it is the *responsibility* of the Dean and Chapter – to maintain the fabric, direct and develop its work, manage its staff and volunteers, and pastor its worshippers and visitors. For me, to have shared in the custodianship of this noble building, together with my colleagues of the Chapter and our partners in the Fabric Advisory Committee, has been the great privilege of my life, and one which has perfectly married my ministerial duties as Dean and my lifelong passion for architecture. A Dean has also a particular duty to set the pace in fundraising; I have done what I could over the years, and this afternoon I invite you to contribute, if you have not already done so, to my final effort to add something to the funds we need each year to maintain this building. You may be sure that I won't ask again. You may be sure that others will.

The Cathedral reflects the life of the community – in County, City, and Diocese. But if it does no more than reflect, it adds nothing of its own. A Cathedral is essentially a place of Christian worship, where the faith of Jesus Christ is celebrated and proclaimed. What I have reflected on this afternoon – this Cathedral's engagement with the wider community, with our country, in social engagement and service to those in need, in the encouragement of learning and in the friendship of other churches and faith communities – all these things are only facets of our single obedience to the one Lord Jesus Christ. Our medieval forebears devised a familiar, but at the time highly original, architectural motif: a church or cathedral building as a three-dimensional cross, planted in the heart of the city, stretching north, south, east, and west, as well as skywards. It is the familiar view of this Cathedral, whether from the top of the Worcestershire Beacon, or from the Cricket Ground, or from the train as it makes its way from Shrub Hill to Foregate Street. It is a metaphor in stone of the love of God, made visible in Jesus Christ, reaching in all directions to embrace the world and reaching upwards to point the world back to God. It what Worcester Cathedral was built to be. It is what, by God's grace, we continue to be.

A Valedictory Sermon preached at Evensong in Worcester Cathedral on Sunday 10 September 2023.

© Peter Atkinson 2023.

EPILOGUE

IT remains for me to say that I have been honoured by the Bishop with the title of Dean Emeritus of Worcester, a title I will treasure, and I will endeavour to fulfil what I believe are the three duties of that office. *First*, to wake every morning with a profound sense of gratitude for the privilege of having ministered here. *Secondly*, to pray for the one who in due time will be the new Dean – unknown to us, unknown to themselves, but already known to God, and therefore someone for whom we should pray – as I do daily. And *thirdly*, most importantly, to keep out of the way.

PETER ATKINSON
Dean of Worcester

© Peter Atkinson 2023.