

A Sermon in King's College Chapel

True Thankfulness

The Dutch Reformed church where I was baptised, in a small village between Rotterdam and Gouda in the Netherlands, had the custom to give the newly baptised a bible verse. The idea being that this verse would travel with the infant, through childhood to adulthood and become a sort of leitmotiv. This was an honourable thought, though also risky depending on the verse given to the child!

The verses that were bestowed on me at my baptism as a six month old baby, came from Colossians 3, the passage we heard this morning. My baptism certificates reads: 'Be thankful' and 'whatever you do in word and deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' Two verses which do not quite follow on in St Paul's letter to the Colossians, but are at least from the same passage and reflect a similar sentiment. Be thankful and give thanks. Thankfulness, whatever you do.

When we take a moment to reflect on life, I am sure that most of us will be able to identify reasons of thankfulness. After all, there is a great deal to be thankful for: for friendships, for love received, for gifts and talents we have, or for getting into our preferred school or college. We will be able to identify those moments when we know we have done the right thing, for others or for ourselves.

But as we identify the good and are thankful, perhaps we are also aware of the times when life is not good, when it has been or is difficult to express thanks. How can one be thankful in the light of uncertainty which our country faces at the moment, or in the light of the pressures of work, or facing the fragility of mental health? Perhaps the course you started full of enthusiasm is not turning out the way you hoped, the loneliness of life away from home is depressing. In the parish where I serve many are

blessed with much, Richmond-upon-Thames is a relatively well off area, but we are also acutely aware of rising number of homeless people among us, we are conscious of those in our congregation who are at breaking point with the demands of work. Personally I sometimes ask myself, how can I be thankful and do the right things as a parish priest when I, like so many other Europeans living in this country, am unsure about the future in the UK?

If we live our lives according to St Paul's instruction, are we living in some fictitious, unrealistic drama in which we pretend all is well?

The parable of the good seeds and the weeds gives us possibly a better, or at least different, perspective. I'm not a good gardener, but I do understand that weeding sometimes means you can pull up the wrong things, the seedlings you actually wanted to nourish. The plants you welcomed in your borders look the same as the ones you don't want, especially when the plants are mere seedlings. Roots have become entwined, good and bad ones. Pull out one and you pull out the other.

In St Matthew's Gospel the parable of the good and bad seeds, the good seeds are wheat, but the weeds are very similar in appearance and can only be differentiated when ripe. So they have to grow together.

It is not a comfortable thought that good and evil are more than side by side, that they are actually entwined below the surface. It would be so much easier if we could all work towards the eradication of evil, the evil within ourselves and the evil we see around us.

The writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned by one of the most brutal regimes of the 20th century in Stalinist Russia and encountered evil first hand. It would have been so easy for him to focus on the very obvious evil 'out there'. Instead, in *Gulag Archipelago*, he writes, "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously

committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

Solzhenitsyn recognises that whether we like it or not, good and evil will grow up side by side: around us and inside us. We should not pretend that all of the world around us is good, when we know it really isn't. However, if we merely focus on evil or the eradication of evil, we lose sight of what is good, what is worthy, what is honourable, what is God. St Paul, as he writes to the Colossians and to us this morning, urges us see what we have, what has been entrusted to us, what potential we may nourish and to be thankful for all of it. Not in a passive way of just saying 'thanks', being thankful is not only an emotion or a feeling, but by letting our gratitude be worked out in action, which inspires, gives life to us as individuals and to those around us.

My grandmother, an ordinary farmer's wife who had experienced some very difficult times during the Second World War when The Netherlands were occupied, was a deeply devout woman. She taught me and my brothers and sister to take time before going to sleep at the end of the day to find one thing, one thing only, which had been a blessing that day. Just one thing, one moment, one encounter, one word. And to treasure that, or to be thankful for it. For that one blessing is a gift, waiting to be recognised. And in recognising, it changes us, makes us more aware that there is goodness around, despite the weeds, the seeds that challenge us.

In that greater awareness we see the image of God, the one whom we call good. For that we are thankful. That inspires us not to give up or give in when life throws difficulty at us. For that we live lives with renewed purpose.

A wise man born more than 500 years ago not far from where I was born, wrote the following prayer which expresses his thankfulness to God better than I ever could. A prayer by Desiderius Erasmus:

Lord Jesus Christ,
you are the sun that always rises, but never sets.
You are the source of all life, creating and sustaining every living thing.
You are the source of all food, material and spiritual, nourishing us in both body and soul.
You are the light that dispels the clouds of error and doubt, and goes before me every hour of the day, guiding my thoughts and my actions.
May I walk in your light,
be nourished by your food,
be sustained by your mercy,
and be warmed by your love.
Amen.

*The Revd Wilma Roest
Team Rector of Richmond
Colossians 3.12-17; Matthew 13.24-30*