

1 THESS 5.18: THANK GOD!

[Chelmsford: New Years Eve 2011]

The story is told of two angels who were once sent down from heaven, each with a large basket. They went from place to place, visiting homes rich & poor, calling on people young & old. At length they returned to heaven with their baskets.

On the way up they met one another. The basket borne by one angel was heavy beyond, full to overflowing; while the other basket was still v. light & had little in it. "What have you in your basket?" asked one angel of the other.

"I was sent to collect the prayers of all the people who said 'I want' & 'Please give me'" answered the angel who carried the heavy load.

'And what have you in yours?' "Oh", replied the angel sadly, "I have been sent to collect the 'Thank you's', but see how few they are"

In this context hear the words of the Apostle Paul to the church in Thessalonica: **Be thankful in all circumstances** (1 Thess 5.18)

Being grateful should be not a difficult task.

- There's always something to be thankful for. If you can't pay your bills, you can be thankful you're not one of your creditors
- Even though we can't have all we want, we ought to be thankful we don't get what we deserve!
- If you think you haven't much to be thankful for, why not be thankful for some of the things you *don't* have!

In particular, we are called to be thankful to God

- "Give thanks to the Lord, because he is good, his love is eternal" (Ps 136) says the Psalmist – and then lists a host of reasons why we should be grateful
- Similarly in Psalm 103 the Psalms writes: "**Praise the Lord, my soul, and do not forget how kind he is**" – or in the words of the NRSV: "**do not forget all his benefits**" (Ps 103.2)
- When writing to the church at Colossae Paul likewise highlights the need to be thankful to God: "**Everything you do or say... should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him**" (Col 3.17)

It has been said that "*The atheist's most embarrassing moment is when he feels profoundly thankful for something but can't think of anybody to thank for it*" (Mary Ann Vincent)

Many of us have got so much to be grateful for - I, for instance, thank God for the marriage of my eldest son, and the safe arrival of a fifth grandchild – I am grateful for the continued love and support of so many in the church, as also for the presence of so many internationals in the church.....

And yet, if we are honest, there are some things which have happened this past year, for which we don't immediately feel grateful.

We find it difficult to do what Paul says & "**be thankful in all circumstances**".

I think, for instance, my daughter-in-law who has battled with cancer this year; my sister who has struggled with deep depression. I can't thank God for cancer and for depression.

But is there nothing for which we can be grateful, even when things have gone wrong?

- A rabbi commented that Daniel in the den of lions had one consolation which has sometimes been overlooked: when the dreadful banquet was over he would not be called on for a vote of thanks!
- As children we were encouraged to play the Pollyanna game - to find something to be grateful even if everything had gone wrong.
- I think John Chrysostom must have known something about the Pollyanna game - he said that a Christian could even give thanks for Hell, because Hell is a threat & therefore a warning to go God's way!

But what if you have had a really wretched year?

I remember that one year we had a Christmas card from a fellow minister - on one side was just one sentence: "*Rita is very very poorly*" (she was in fact dying of cancer); on the other side the church motto: "*Hallelujah Anyway!*"

I don't believe we can thank God for everything - some things are positively evil.

I find it significant that the Apostle Paul does not write: "*be thankful FOR all circumstances*", but rather, "**be thankful IN all circumstances**".

Sometimes there are terrible things for which we certainly cannot give God thanks. Nonetheless, when everything goes wrong, we can thank God that he will have the last word - in the words of Rom 8.28: "**We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him**".

All of us long for a trouble free life - but we would be the poorer without troubles
The Arabs were right: "*All sunshine makes a desert*"

The fact is: suffering can be productive. Paul was therefore able to write: "**Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character**" (Rom 5.3-4 NRSV)
Marine biologists tells us that pearls are produced through pain: "*A tiny parasitic worm bores through the shell of the oyster, and the movement of the water eventually carries a speck of sand into the now unprotected, sensitive body inside. To stop the irritation the oyster excretes a substance to cover the irritant; but the irritation is never wholly removed by being covered up, so the process of stopping it continues and a pearl comes into being*".

Time and again God uses the difficulties of life to turn us into saints.

Therefore let's learn to "**Thank God no matter what happens**" (Peterson, The Message). Or in the words of the REB: "**Give thanks whatever happens**"