

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Psalm 66

Luke 17:11-19

Re-minding the forgetful God

*In a sentence:
Life begins with thanksgiving*

“Say ‘ta’ ” is one of the first things we teach our children: it’s nice to say thank you. And it is! As a polite social noise, saying thank you paves the way for easy exchange, even when the gratitude might not be particularly deep.

Saying thanks is central to our Gospel text this morning. But what does the thanksgiving “do”? The structure of the story might be read to suggest that the thanksgiving is the basis of the healing: “you are made well because you have given thanks”. This is not unlike what our children learn: saying “ta” increases the likelihood of getting more stuff! Yet this doesn’t match the story. Had the grateful Samaritan not returned to Jesus, Jesus might have said of all ten who cried out for healing, “Your faith made you well”, for all were healed simply at the asking. So gratitude doesn’t get us stuff, at least so far as God is concerned. But what, then, is the purpose of thanksgiving? To get deeper into this, we need to look a little into the problem of gift-giving.

Over the last few months, a number of us have been reading and discussing a book by Miroslav Volf on giving and forgiving (*Free of Charge*). We have seen how difficult it is to give a gift. It is easy, of course, to present someone with something, but this is rarely true gift-giving. Perhaps we give because it’s expected of us (it’s her birthday, and that’s what you do), or because someone has given us something and we feel obligated to return the favour (thereby fulfilling local righteousness). Perhaps we give to ingratiate ourselves and to receive some favour in return now or later, or perhaps we’re just clearing out our cupboards, and “giving” away our junk is a useful twofer. Real or perceived, these mixed motivations make it hard to know that our gift is truly free of compulsion and self-interest – in totality about the recipient and not about the giver herself. Our gifts tend to have value to us, the givers, and we look to see this value realised. Strangely, but probably correctly, Volf goes so far as to speculate that the only way a giver could be confident that her gift is truly free of ulterior motives is if she intends to forget having given it, and so to have no further expectation from it precisely because it is forgotten. The true gift is forgotten by the giver.

This invites a strange thought: if the gracious God gives perfectly – freely and without self-interest – we could say that God “forgets” having given. The word “forget” means – literally and concretely – to “un-grasp” something, to let it go. Forgetting releases the thing said or done. This means that, having healed the ten in the story, the gift cannot be manipulated against the recipients because God has no further interest here, which is the meaning of “forgetting”. This forgetting is not a divine “senior moment”. To say that God forgets is to say a positive thing negatively: unlike like our own gift-giving, what God gives is a true gift. We might note here that the Bible has long maintained that, in *forgiving*, God forgets our sin [e.g. Isaiah 43.25, Jeremiah 31.34 and Hebrews 8.12]. If we believe that God forgets the sin, we must believe that God forgets the forgiving.

This is more than just a little odd, in at least two ways. First, what could it mean that God forgets and, second, what now is thanksgiving?

First, then, how can the all-knowing God forget? In fact, the notion of an all-knowing God is itself a negative idea and no better than the notion of a forgetful God. To say that God knows all things is simply to say that God's knowing is not like ours; if our knowledge is limited, we then say that God's knows everything. God's ways are not our ways. And so, if it's the case that we prefer not to forget having given gifts because the giving might still benefit us, we are free to say that God's giving is so different from ours that God *does* forget. Of course, this is a rhetorical trick, but all speech about the gods is rhetorical trickery. We are just more familiar with some Godtalk and so imagine it to be more sensible than novel trickery like a God who must forget if we are to be both healed and free. God appears as much between the words as in them. If we speak a truth about God, any strangeness in what we say has to do with what we are also denying. "God forgets" means that God's giving is unlike our giving. And so we affirm that God forgets the gift.

What then of the second question, about thanksgiving? What could thanksgiving be if God forgets having given, and so seems to *release* us from the responsibility of saying "ta"? The answer is as strange as the suggestion that God might have forgotten in the first place. We give thanks in order to remind God that he has given. To give thanks is to *name* God as Giver, and in this naming we bring God as giver to God's own mind, and to our own. This thanksgiving is not polite noise; it goes to the heart of our relationship to God as a relationship of giving and receiving. God forgets the gift but we must not, because it is our re-minding God and ourselves that the creature-creator relationship is renewed.

When Jesus commends the Samaritan's faith, then, he speaks not of the wish which cries out just in case Jesus might be able to do something to help. And faith is certainly not our ability to distort our minds to accommodate creeds which don't yet make sense to us. Our passage suggests, rather, that our minds are already distorted – or, at least, nine minds out of ten are. "Your faith has made you well" is not about the total remission of the illness but the entry into remembrancing the gift of life *as* a gift. Faith sees the gift.

This is worth saying because of how rare it is. In today's reading, the frequency is one in ten. Last week's Gospel reading (from Sunday 26C) was even more pessimistic. After discussing how we know the truth about ourselves and God, the text concluded, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16.19-31). This is a radical scepticism about the power of a miracle to change human hearts: despite the miracle, we will still get the gift wrong. Transferring this to today's text, the scepticism becomes, "neither will they be convinced if I cure ten sufferers of their debilitating illness." Convinced of what? Convinced not of God's power to heal but that this God is the one and only source of all life. Life is knowing where life is to be found. The shock of the story is that while ten survive, only one lives.

The urging in our reading today is not towards believing in healing miracles but towards believing that we could live a "eucharistic" existence, to borrow from the Greek for thankfulness. This is to experience life as grace-d givenness. It is to *become* that miracle which is the creature who finds life again at its source in God, even in the midst of the chaos around us. For if, indeed, we live in a world in which nine out of ten forget to say thanks for the gift of life, it is surely a chaotic world.

Let us, then, give thanks with no mere "saying ta" but in such a way as to re-mind ourselves by re-minding God, for our old minds will not get us to where we need to go.
