

Isaiah 55:1-13

Psalm 65

Matthew 13:2-9

Eucharist: thanksgiving as becoming

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*In a sentence:*

*Thanksgiving, properly, opens us up to God's next good thing*

**On Saying "Ta"**

It is not long after our children begin to develop a sense for language that we teach them to say 'ta'. This is an important lesson for at least two reasons.

First, and obviously, we want to instil a sense of humility and gratitude in our little ones. We can't do everything for ourselves, so we learn to say thanks when someone gives us something we need.

But second – and less obvious in the lesson – saying "ta" is an essential social noise. Many personal exchanges require this of us, and so we learn to say it almost automatically. We say "Good morning" and "How are you?" when we meet someone, without really thinking about the quality of their morning or wanting to know *too* much detail about how they are. Similarly, saying "thanks" brings *closure* to a personal interaction. We say thanks when someone gives us the few coins we are owed in change, or at the end of an email, or we give a wave of thanks when someone lets us into the line of traffic. Saying "ta" is a kind of social lubricant.

Our thanks can, of course, be much more heartfelt than this, just as our greetings can be more sincere than they often are. Yet saying thanks is always *at least* the social noise. And, as a social noise which concludes some human exchange, thanksgiving is an inherently *past*-oriented action.

**"Thank God"**

What does this mean for saying thanks *to God*, as we might understand ourselves to be doing today, now taking leave of a significant part of our past?

We get some sense of the church's thanksgiving by examining how we sometimes pray. We thank God, perhaps, for a good harvest ("Harvest Thanksgiving"). We thank God for new members who join the congregation or for the excellent weather we had on the church picnic (at least, in those days when we had church picnics!). We thank God because one of our number escaped harm in some recent catastrophe. We might even dare to thank God for the outcome of an election. Such thanksgiving as this is in the standard mode of exchange and closure. Something has happened that we attribute to God's action, and so we respond with the necessary social – or necessary *pious* – noise.

Of course, thanking God is often contentious. The lovely day we enjoyed for the church picnic might have been one more day on which a desperate farmer did not get the rain she so earnestly prayed for. And the test case for all pious thanksgiving in closure mode is the crucifixion of the Christ: Thank God that we are finally rid of Jesus the Nazarene.

We might reasonably suspect, nonetheless, that we must make some thanksgivings like this. We give thanks for worship services in workshops and hotels here in North Melbourne in the early 1850s, for the laying of various foundation stones between 1859 and 1898, and for the taking of responsibility as circumstances changed. We give thanks

for the consolidation of earlier communities here in 1987 and 1996, and for all the efforts over the past 15 years or so which sought to maintain our presence here. We must do this because the social noise – and its pious version – does matter. People have done their best, and we thank God for them and for the benefits of their labours.

And yet, thanksgiving like this also brings each of these exchanges between God and us to their respective closures. As such, our thanksgiving here remains oriented towards “yesterday”.

### ***Eucharist: Thanksgiving as Becoming***

But the church does more than this in its thanksgiving. At the heart of the life of any (small c) catholic Christian worship is “the Eucharist”. We know it also, of course, as “the Lord’s Supper” and “Holy Communion” or even “the Mass”, but perhaps “Eucharist” characterises the sacrament best. From a Greek root, the word means “thanksgiving”. How does the church give thanks *here*?

A major feature of that part of our worship is the “Great Prayer of Thanksgiving”. This prayer tells the story of creation, of the call of the people of Israel, and of God’s struggles with that people. We hear of the sending of Jesus, of his death and resurrection, and of the fruit of God’s saving work in him. All of this is told in the past tense, and so it looks very much like saying thanks in the mode of exchange and closure. In the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, we say “Ta”.

But the Eucharist – the thanksgiving – is not yet over. We move from the prayer into the actions around the bread and wine: the blessing, the breaking of the bread and the eating and drinking. *This, too*, is thanksgiving, but now we are not bringing closure but opening up, not drawing to an end but becoming the shape of a beginning.

And what is beginning is the Body of Christ – the church – nourished by and participating in the humanity of Jesus, which is signed in the eating and drinking of bread and the wine said to be the body and blood of Jesus. We persist in this ghastly image because we are what we eat. Let us receive what we are, Augustine says, Let us become what we receive: even the Body of Christ.

For the church to say thanks, *properly as church*, is then not to look back to some closed past of Jesus. For the church to give thanks for Jesus is for it to *become itself the Body of Christ*. To give thanks for Christ is to become an openness to the future. If we remember the work of God in Christ, we remember our future, so that thanksgiving is a process of *becoming* that future.

And so, to thank God is not bring closure; it is to make a *commitment*. “Do this”, Jesus says, “for the making again of me”. For the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist to give thanks for all that we and our predecessors have known of God’s grace of God is, then, for us to *re-commit ourselves* as bearers of God’s grace. There is no closure here, only openness to God’s next good thing.

When Gods call us to thanksgiving, we are not only to remember the past but are challenged to make a *commitment* to a future about which we know nothing except that the Father’s heart is there, waiting for the arrival of the Body of the Son – waiting of *our* arrival. And to arrive, we must go, now as always.

We don’t know where we are going, in the sense that really matters. We know only that God will be there.

Thanksgiving, then, is a risky venture and not for the fainthearted. Thanksgiving remembers and closes and releases and, from there, turns to the openness of a genuinely new and unknown day.

How does the church say thanks? In fear and trembling, throwing ourselves forward into the promise of God.

God says to us now, "Say ta. I dare you. And when you do, you shall go out with joy, and be led back in peace, and the mountains and the hills will burst into song, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

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