

ABOUT GRATITUDE

Today we will express gratitude for the Grace of God as it was embodied in Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life. Communion is a regular, formalized way of recognizing the presence of saving Grace - of recognizing God's love and mercy. As we prepare to take Communion, we may be prompted to consider a distinction between acknowledging that we have a reason to express gratitude and having the experience of *feeling* gratitude. To take this distinction seriously could be somewhat troublesome; but doing so yields insight into the nature of our faith.

The distinction between acknowledging that we have a reason to express gratitude and having the experience of feeling gratitude relates to our understanding that there is a difference between, on the one hand, our outer lives and, on the other, our in our lives. At times, we may find the difference between our outer and inner lives troubling - times when the difference becomes obvious to us and we doubt our sincerity, our authenticity. We know that there are people who live double lives, who have private selves that are very different from their public selves, and we recoil from thinking that we are like such people. With some frequency the news presents us with stories about public figures who, it has come to light, live private lives that are very different from the images of themselves they have provided for public consumption. Of course, we are not sensationally divided in the difference between what we present to the world and who we are behind closed doors, but our noticing a division in ourselves me sometimes bother us.

Maybe your childhood memories include having to sit down after special events - Christmas or your birthday, perhaps - and, at a parents insistence writing thank you notes to relatives and friends of the family who sent you gifts. The notes expressed gratitude, but what they also said was, "see, I have manners." Even if you actually felt gratitude, the chore of performing according to proper form they have suggested the idea that growing up carried with the expectation of living a double life - chafing prospect. In time, we adjust to living with the problem Dash to the point, perhaps, where it occurs to us that it is to be seen only very rarely as an actual problem. We learn formulas for expressing thanks. We learn a great many different formulaic expressions and behaviors that seem required by the world. But how do we feel, after years of expressing gratitude under various circumstances, how about thanking God for his love and mercy?

Considering the distinction between the inner life and the outer life contributes to our appreciation of what Jesus says in response to a question people ask him in today's gospel reading - the question, " what must we do to do the works God requires?" The question may strike us as a basically reasonable one. And it may occur to us that if people consistently sought the answer to this question the world would be much better than it is. Certainly, Jesus knew that the world would be better if people tried to obey the laws of righteousness as God communicated them to the children of Abraham through Moses. The people who ask Jesus the question may anticipate a response that says as much. However, Jesus says, "this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." An implication of what our Lord says seems to be that even if we try to act in a chord with the rules of righteousness, we can fail to live as God would have us live - that in an essential something can be missing.

Jesus wants us to put attention on the distinction between actions that we take or do not take and what we hold in our hearts and minds about our relationship with God. Even if we *do* what we think God wants us to do, in our outer lives, if we fail to appreciate our being in a relationship with the God who so loved the world that He gave to it His Son, righteousness we display to which the world might testify is incomplete righteousness. The totality of our lives cannot be lived in a strained effort of obedience. But total integration in our selfhood becomes possible if we except the truth that righteous living comes in response, not to fear of a God who

needs to use punishment and pain to make His will manifest in how people live, but rather comes in response to a God who loves us so much that he wants the best for us. He loves us so much that he wants the very best for us. To believe in God's love and care is to believe in the embodiment of that love and care - Christ Jesus. *Believing*, as Jesus would have us believe, is receiving Jesus into our hearts is the son of the living God and having a *felt* response to that truth about him.

Essential life - true and complete life – is offered to those who experience a grateful response to the life of Christ. Jesus tells those who have ears to hear, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be Thirsty." With this declaration Jesus responds to those who demand that he present to them a miracle such as was delivered to their ancestors when God provided, prompted by Moses's intercession on their behalf, manna in the wilderness. Jesus himself, in himself the manifestation of God's love and care, *is* the miracle - for the day and forevermore. For what we essentially need, for totality of life, Jesus is our drink as well as our food. As the ancient Israelites were provided with water from a rock (*Numbers 20:1-13*), all who believe in Jesus, though the world may seem as lifeless and as hard as a rock, experience satisfaction of their most basic needs.

But with both direct reference to manna in the wilderness and what may seem an indirect reference to water from a rock there is, implicitly, a reference to the ingratitude of the Israelites shepherded by Moses - to the ingratitude of ancestors who forgot the wonder of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and grumbled about hardships in their wilderness journey. Because of their faithlessness at Meribah, were they bitterly complained of thirst until Moses appealed to God for help and water was made to flow from a rock, a whole generation was denied entry into the promised land. Obsession with worldly needs - hunger, for which the people received manna; thirst, for which they received water from a rock - blinded the ancestors of those who now demand, in the way of their ancestors, a miraculous sign from Jesus as pre-requisite to their having faith in God's care and, subsequent to faith, gratitude. Like their ancestors, those who trouble Jesus with an extraordinary demand seem capable of experiencing gratitude that is only of a provisional kind: *If* we get what we want when we want it, *then* we will be appreciative. It seems that they have too little heart to respond to the grace of God. Jesus, himself the grace of God, has finally come into the lives of the descendants of the wilderness travelers, offering imperishable and inexhaustible spiritual food and drink. But too many people are unprepared or are disinclined to feel the effect of God's love and mercy in their lives. Jesus will have to go to the cross.

God chose a tumultuous time in history and an especially troubled place for the revelation, in Christ, of His love and mercy. The apostle Paul saw great significance in the fact that worldly obsessions – sinfulness – shaped human life in the time when and place where Christ lived a mortal life: "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. And what God proves his love for us and it well we still were sinners Christ died for us." As the people of a crumbling nation faced the prospect of desolation and enslavement, God presented the manifestation of his timeless and unfounded love. There would be no peace for those who could not respond to that love. Forced adherence to a program of righteousness could not supply peace. Only believe in the grace of God, and belief as the heart experiences it - in faith – could supply it. For faith to be operative, fully integrating outer and inner selves in individual human lives call now credited for the grace of God, not satisfactory material proof of God's care, became the prerequisite. So it was, and has been for generations, and is to this very day.