

Good Gratitude

Luke 17:11-19; 18:9-14

Service of Thanksgiving

9th October 2011

I must admit to being disturbed by a certain popular saying so often on the lips of people these days. "There but for the grace of God, go I." How many times do we hear that being said by different people? "There but for the grace of God, go I." How many times do we say it ourselves?

A car runs a red light, narrowly missing me as I proceed across the intersection. "There but for the grace of God, go I." A tree comes down in the storm, right across the driveway where I was just standing. "There but for the grace of God, go I." A friend dies from the very disease I have managed to overcome. "There but for the grace of God, go I," we say in these situations, with a nod heaven-ward.

But just think of the theology of these words for a moment. If we say, "There but for the grace of God, go I," it means that we are thanking God for favouring us over other people in the world. It means that, somehow, we believe that God is sitting up there in his heaven, looking down on earth and trying to decide who gets affected by a storm or who gets caught up in a murder. Or, maybe he's looking down on a tragic accident developing on one of our roads and he is saying to himself, "Now, unfortunately, I can't stop somebody getting hurt or killed here. It's going to happen anyway. These cars are definitely going to collide. But I have a choice: I can let these folks be involved in this car crash or, maybe, on second thoughts, it should be those other ones. Maybe I should let that man there be hurt because he fired all these people from his company this week without due cause. But then his wife is such an angel, all that work she does for the church and charity. No, I think I'll let it be this other family that bears the brunt of this particular catastrophe."

Now, when we spell it out this way. It seems rather ludicrous, doesn't it? Surely a God such as ours, a God of love, would never think or act this way. Of course, not. But that is exactly the logical or theological outworking of the words that we so often say, "There but for the grace of God, go I." In the very act of gratitude that God is being gracious to us in a particular situation, we are thereby accepting of the fact that he has made a choice and that he is not being gracious to another person or group of people. Too bad for them. Just their misfortune.

Even if we don't utter these actual words, how often do we silently thank God that we are not personally caught up in some trouble happening elsewhere to some other person? Thank goodness I'm not caught up in that violence in Libya or Syria. Thank goodness that soldier killed in Afghanistan was not my son. Thank goodness

that student in Italy accused of murder was not my daughter. Thank goodness that little boy bullied at school was not my grandson. Thank goodness the tornadoes that devastated these communities down south didn't come anywhere near us here in Ontario. Thank goodness it wasn't anyone in my family that was hurt in that New York helicopter crash the other day.

Now, we can't deny entertaining such sentiments from time to time. It's only human nature to do so. To want to distance ourselves from situations of trouble. To lull ourselves into thinking that we somehow live on a different planet, in a different time and space, where such things could never arrive on our doorstep. But when we do experience or express such thankfulness, let's be honest and recognise that, though it's technically gratitude, it's bad gratitude. It's being thankful but thankful in the wrong way. Thankful at someone else's expense.

Another variation of the "bad gratitude" attitude is found in the Parable Jesus told of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. When the two men were praying in the Temple, the Pharisee looked down his nose at his fellow-worshipper and prayed disdainfully, "I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. I fast two days a week and give you one tenth of all my income."¹

And, again, we would have to be honest and admit that we, too, are not averse to nurturing such sentiments. "Yes, I thank you, God," we can just hear ourselves saying. "I thank you that I am not like these welfare bums over there who take a free ride from society. I thank you, God, that I am a good upright member of society and don't waste my life in bars and clubs. I thank you, God, that I am not always gossiping and saying bad things about people behind their backs. I thank you, too, God, that I am a religious person, that I put a good amount of money in the offering plate when I come to church at Christmas and Easter, and I know you will have a special place in heaven for me when I get there." Many are the manifestations of bad gratitude. But, hopefully, the more we become aware of this questionable attitude, the more we can work to avoid it.

Of course, much as we should be at pains to avoid feelings and expressions of bad gratitude, we must also positively embrace the very opposite. Good gratitude. Ways of giving thanks that are not at the expense of other people but, instead, will enrich the lives of others around us and uplift our lives in the process. But what constitutes good gratitude?

If the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is a

text-book example of bad gratitude, then the story of the Ten Lepers is the reverse.² It is the very epitome of good gratitude.

We often wonder why the Tenth Leper healed returned to thank Jesus personally when the others did not. Was it just good manners learned at his mother's knee? Or some previous brush with death that brought heightened awareness of God's great gift of healing? Or, was he just more appreciative of what he had in any particular moment of time? While the others impatiently shot off to find that future "more-out-of-life" they so earnestly desired and which their illness denied them, the man who returned to Jesus seemed to be happy to enjoy what he had been given in the present. Like St. Paul he had learned to be content in whatever circumstances he found himself,³ without constantly looking over his shoulder to where the grass was greener and looking for what he did not have.

In his book, *The Song of the Bird*, Jesuit priest, Anthony de Mello, tells of a prosperous industrialist who came across a fisherman lying beside his boat at the dock, smoking a pipe. "Why are you not out fishing?" the businessman enquired of the seemingly lazy fisherman. He answered that he had already caught enough fish for the day. "Then why don't you catch some more?" challenged the industrialist. The fisherman replied, "What would I do with them?" Somewhat exasperated, he told the fisherman how he could sell the fish, earn more money, buy a bigger boat, better nets, venture into deeper waters, catch still more fish and make even more money. "Then you could expand your business, buy a fleet of boats, and eventually become a rich man like me," said the high-powered executive. "What would I do then?" the fisherman asked. "Then you could really begin to enjoy life," answered the rich man. The fisherman took a few more puffs on his pipe and said lazily, "What do you think I am doing right now?"⁴

Good gratitude is not constantly chasing that "more-out-of-life" we so often crave. It is being thankful for what we have, when we have it. And, further, it is the ability, like the returning leper, to see what we have as coming from none other than the hand of God himself.

Although she became blind and deaf when only 19 months old, Helen Keller, who was born in 1880, once said, "So much has been given to me, I have no time to ponder what has been denied." So she worked hard at learning to use Braille. She practised speaking over and over again although she could not hear. Despite the massive challenge of her disabilities, she turned them into abilities. Despite the great obstacles along her life's way, she transformed them into opportunities. So much so that she earned a Bachelor of Arts university degree, became a lecturer as well as a political activist campaigning for women's suffrage and workers' rights, as well as writing many articles and books on the subjects dear to heart. By the time she died in 1968, nearly 88 years old, Helen Keller had led a very fulfilling and productive life because she had, among other qualities, an attitude of good gratitude. She welcomed every day as a

wonderful gift from God – full of rich memories, present opportunities and new expectations.⁵

"We may not have burdens or difficulties similar to Helen Keller's," says one writer, "Nonetheless, we can all share her spirit of thankfulness by dwelling – not on what has been denied – but on what has been given to us by God."⁶

So if we are going to be truly thankful at this Thanksgiving time, let us identify what is bad gratitude and replace it with the good. Let us replace it with good gratitude for all our many blessings. Good gratitude for blessings which have not just happened in some random, chance way. But blessings that have come straight from the hand of God himself.

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¹ Luke 18:11, 12

² Luke 17: 11-19

³ Philippians 4:11

⁴ Anthony de Mello, *The Song of the Bird*, Image Books, 1984

⁵ "Gratitude is an Attitude", *LectionAid*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Year C, September - November 2001, p.27

⁶ Ibid.