



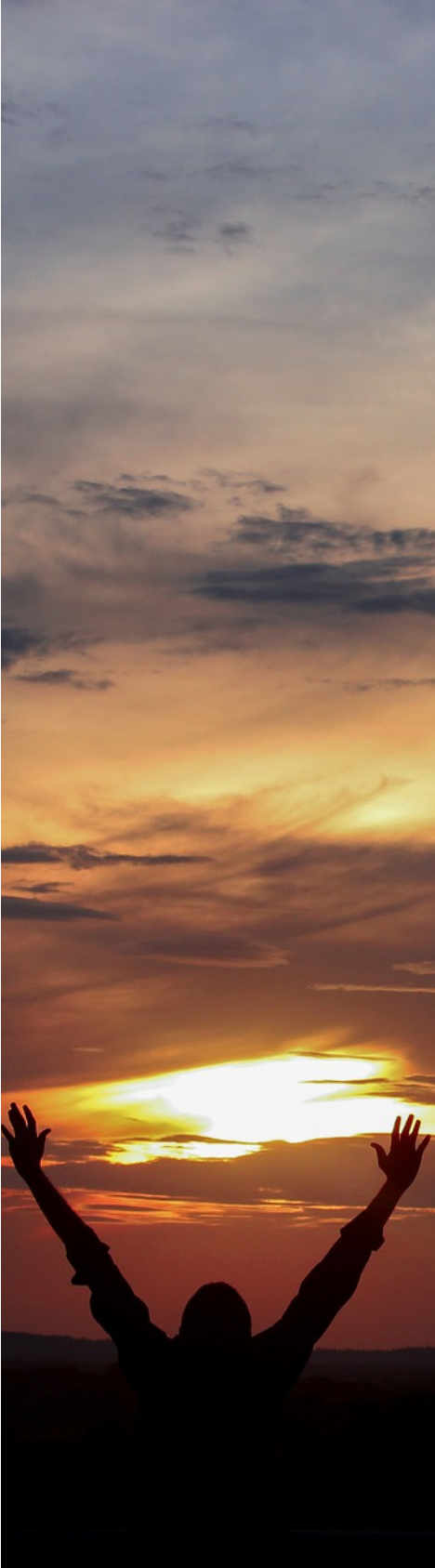
LENTEN STUDY 2021

GRATITUDE

Five Reflections with Discussion Questions

It is right indeed, it is our joy and our salvation, holy Lord, almighty Father, everlasting God, at all times and in all places to give you thanks and praise through Christ your only Son.

Dr Carolyn (Kim) King



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CREATION



"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions?Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone— while the morning stars sang together, and all the angels shouted for joy?....Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God's dominion over the earth?"

Job 38:4-7, 33.

The natural world of Creation is far too large and complex to understand at face value, and Job quite rightly stood abashed by God's rebuke. Although we now know more about how Creation works than Job did, all our human knowledge still counts for nothing before God. Like Job, people of faith recognise that there are many things too wonderful for us to know (Job 42:3).

But by faith we can at least believe in certain things *about* God's world, which give us confidence in it, and stir our deepest thanks. Scientists believe the natural world is ordered, not random, and that learning to understand it supplies marvellous satisfaction to enquiring human minds. Millions of ordinary people outside any religious tradition believe it is worth protecting with our fiercest conservation laws, not because animals and plants have any more right to exist than we do, but because wild things are not ours to despoil. Christians see Creation as good, not in the moral sense and not merely because it is beautiful, but because it is our home and our meeting-place with God. All these are reasons for enormous gratitude for Creation.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Gen 1.31



God's world is rather like a classic set of nested dolls - three figures, one inside another. The largest is the natural world, and scientists rely on Darwin's map all the time to help them understand nature, and also a great deal about ourselves. But inside the natural world is a middle-sized figure, the human world. All humans are part of nature, but not all nature is human - just as all dogs are four-legged animals, but not all four-legged animals are dogs. That is why the human world, the second figure, fits inside the largest one. We are both part of nature and also in some way beyond it. We depend on the natural world for food and shelter, just as animals do. Our lives are constantly supported by it, in ways that uplift the heart every day.

Finally, within the human world there is a third one, the spiritual world, inhabited by people who have caught a glimpse of God. All human cultures have some inkling of God, and all have different names for their perceptions of the divine.

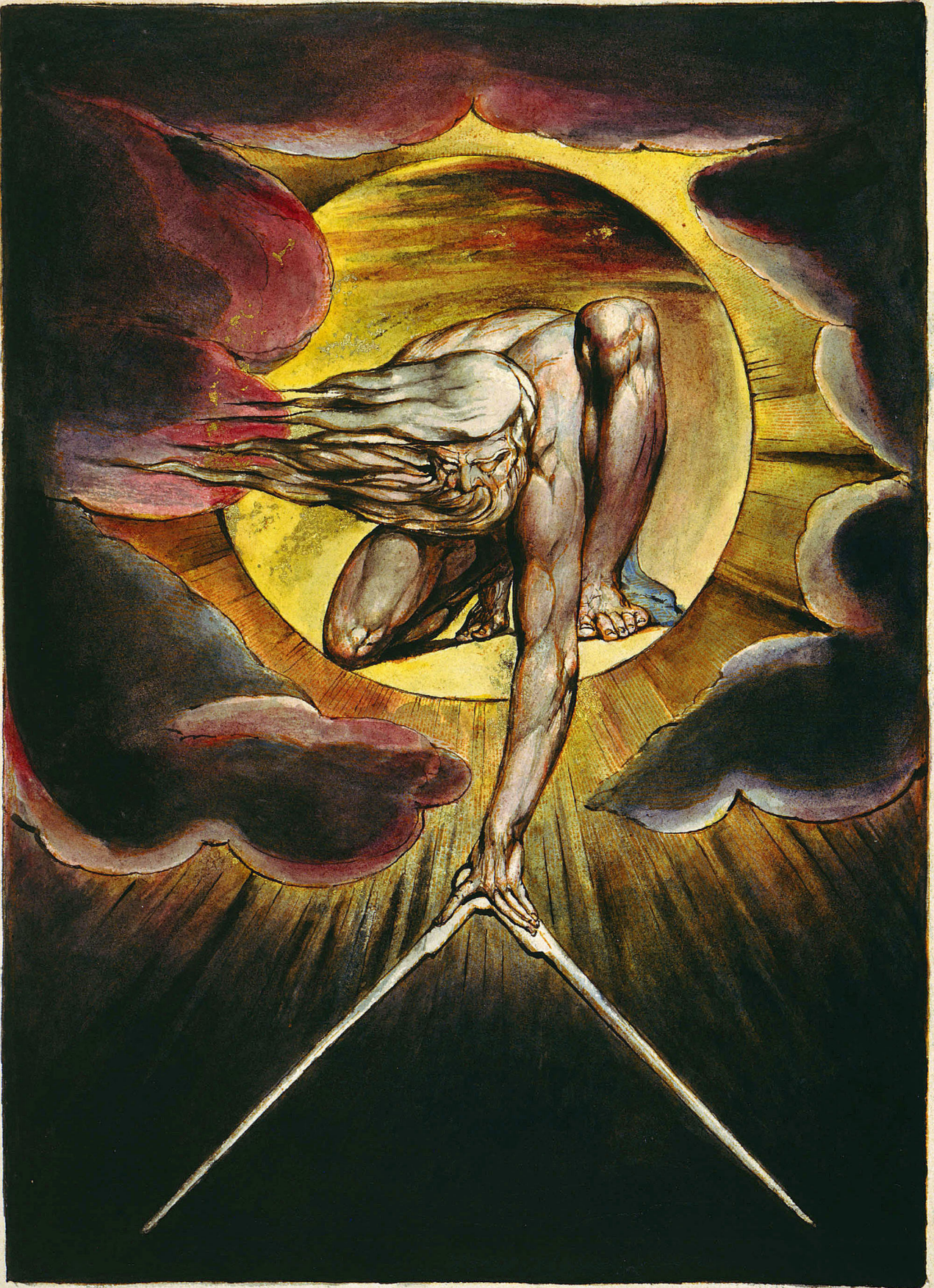


Christians respect that, knowing that God is far bigger than any religion, and yet in our experience, we find that our vision is clearest when we approach God through Jesus Christ.

Because of what Jesus said and did during his lifetime, and because the people who knew him and of him wrote about him in words we can read today, a most wonderful thing has happened. The grace of God is able to flow through him, to fill the innermost figure and the lives of all those who struggle and fail to imitate him. Then it overflows out of the spiritual world, and runs into the human world, reaching and enhancing the lives of ordinary people whether they know of God or not. Finally, it overflows from the human world, the middle figure, and fills the outer one, the whole natural world, with unconditional love and energy. The beauty we see in nature is a gift from God to us, and we can see and love it because God is there behind it, even though God does not literally paint the flowers or tune-up the blackbirds.

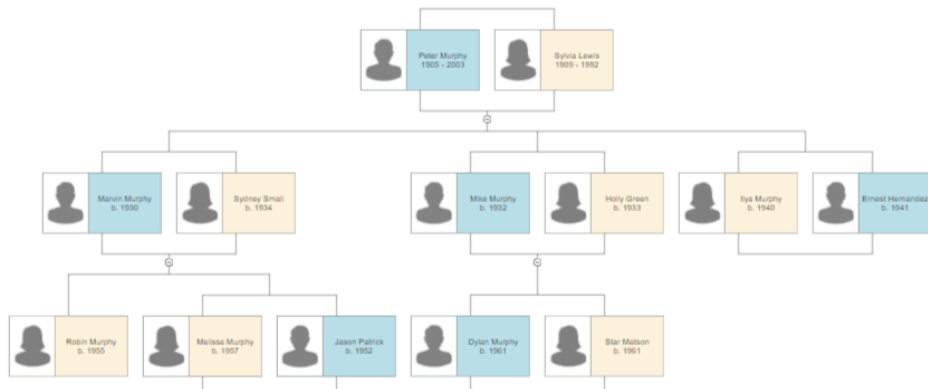
One interpretation of what Jesus said might be: I am the Way, but you do not follow me. I am the Truth, but you do not believe in me. I am the Life, but you do not live in me. If you're unhappy don't blame me.

Do you think this is fair? If not, why not?



William Blake, *The Ancient of Days*, 1794

FAMILY



Our obligations to our parents have been acknowledged and reinforced since earliest times, and not only because children of any culture recognise and respond to the love and care of their parents with natural affection and gratitude. In some cultures, ancestors were elevated to guardian status, and reverence for them is part of normal life. In Samoa, the tombs of the deceased are constructed in the garden of a family home, so they can remain a continuing part of the affairs of their living descendants. One of the saddest consequences of the 2009 tsunami that flattened the villages on the south coast of Samoa was that families had to move to safer areas, leaving their ancestors behind.



Ancestral graves in Samoa

- What do you know of your ancestors?
- How do you see them and their influence on your life?
- What are the stories that are handed down from one generation to another?
- How do you relate to your sisters and brothers in Christ throughout history?



In Hebrew tradition, the obligation of filial duty was directly linked to the highest possible authority, the foundational covenant with God. The fifth of the Ten Commandments made the point explicit and memorable. Every child for generation after generation memorised the Ten Commandments, so there was no chance of anyone forgetting it.

*Honor your father and your mother,
as the Lord your God has
commanded you, so that you may
live long and that it may go well
with you in the land the Lord your
God is giving you.*

Deut 5: 16

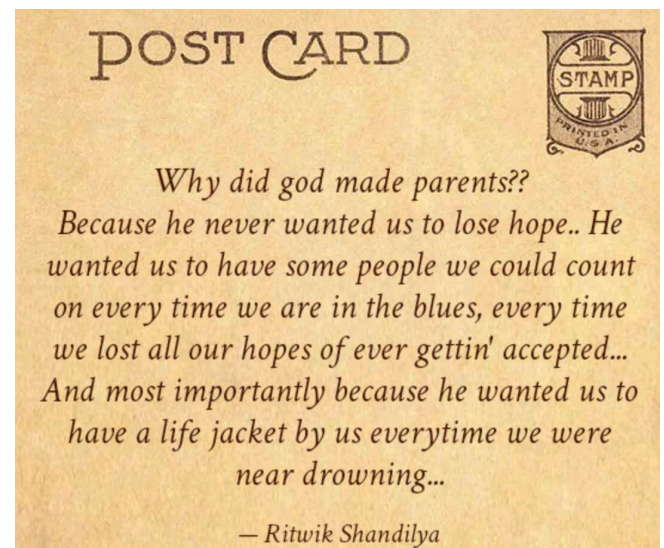
For those of us who come from a traditional nuclear family this probably makes good sense. However, that is no longer the norm. Divorce, separation, and blended families are ubiquitous. At the same time, far too many have been abused by parents and caregivers. For some, the idea of a 'loving parent' is completely foreign and an instruction to honour them is unbearable.

Furthermore, there are many models of family embraced by the term 'whanau'. Indeed, we are all brothers and sisters. Jesus famously asked who his mother and siblings were, before announcing that anyone who did the will of his Father in heaven was his brother and sister and mother (Matt 12:48-50).

- What assumptions do you bring to conversations about 'family' and 'parents'?



- Does the passage from Deuteronomy compete with Jesus' words in Matthew - or are there other ways to engage with the 'tension'?



In ancient societies without any form of the sort of state-funded welfare we now take for granted, family support was the only form of social security available for the elderly and infirm. So if parents lived long enough to become too old to work (not many did), they had to depend on their families. Many families, then and now, gladly care for their honoured elderly members, but human nature being what it is, some families might be reluctant to oblige, or look for ways to avoid their clear duty. Jesus himself had some hard words for such people (see Matt 15:4-6). Likewise, St Paul emphasised the need to honour parents "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth" (Eph 6:2).



In other words, God's law must be obeyed not only because it carries God's authority, but also because obedience to God's laws is ultimately in our own interests. When parents willingly commit to the labour and sacrifice of caring for vulnerable children, and children in their turn willingly commit to the labour and sacrifice of caring for their parents when they become vulnerable in their old age, the tight-knit bonds of family love and mutual gratitude becomes the bed rock of a stable society.

The uniquely painful alternative is nowhere better expressed than by William Shakespeare: "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!" (King Lear, Act 1 Scene 4).

Waikato Cathedral

"We aim to be a Christ-centred Cathedral church family. We welcome everyone's contribution and presence with us as full members of the church. We celebrate the presence and contribution of people of all ages and constantly strive to be a community where everyone feels welcome, valued and able to worship."

- What does that mean to you?
- Is that your experience of church?
- What might need to change?
- What contribution could you make to people feeling like they belong to a family?

Gratitude is the heart of worship and we are called to worship as sisters and brothers in the body of Christ. As a worshipping family, we are called into relationship with one another. One mark of being family is sharing hospitality. What could you do to contribute to familial hospitality?

FAMILY



HARD TIMES



It may sound counter-intuitive to say that we should be grateful to God even for the hard times. But if we remain open to God's grace throughout a bad patch, we often find an unexpected, irreplaceable blessing at the end of it. Moreover, it often comes from a surprising source. Take for example the story of Naaman, in 2 Kings Ch 5.

Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy (v.1)

In Naaman's time, and for centuries afterwards, leprosy was about the worst hard time you could have. It was incurable, disfiguring, crippling, and it led to devastating social rejection, which would be especially unbearable for a man of Naaman's rank. But he happened to hear, through a captive servant girl from Israel, that there was a prophet in Samaria who could cure him. So he swallowed his pride, and

set off with an enormous pile of money in the hope of being able to buy a cure.



Deformity caused by leprosy

Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy.

Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had

told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!'" So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy. (vv. 9-14)



The River Jordan

Naaman was astonished, and then overwhelmingly grateful, but Elisha refused to accept the huge reward Naaman offered. Instead, Naaman learned, first, the potential penalty of pride and ingratitude, and second, that the God of Israel was stronger than Rimmon, the god of his own people, and vowed to worship him instead. In later years Naaman was no doubt more than grateful for the hard times that led to his renewed, healthy life.



Can you think of a time when you have felt grateful for hard times?

How did you arrive at gratitude?

What have you learned from this experience that you might be able to share with others to encourage them?

What are the risks of encouraging people to be thankful for hard times?

How might this inform the way you hear other's suffering?

Healing of Naaman





Job Rebuked by his Friends
William Blake, June, 1805

The definitive biblical text concerned with suffering is of course the book of Job, and Lent is the perfect time to read it! However, it is easy to believe the poem's emphasis is upon Job's physical suffering when in fact he is more concerned with how his relations, neighbours, and friends treat him.

Perhaps Job's greatest anguish comes from the breakdown of his theological world-view, especially how he sees God. Ultimately he discovers that his understanding of God is just too small.

- What moments have caused you to redefine your understanding of God?
- How has this affected you and the way you relate to God?

HEALING



"As Jesus was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

(Luke 17:12-13)

When word got around that Jesus had the power to cure them, known lepers were put in an agonising dilemma. Because leprosy was such an obvious and loathsome disease, and also highly infectious, lepers were recognised and ejected from ordinary society, and forbidden from any close contact with uninfected people. That meant that, however desperate lepers were to approach the only person who could offer them any hope, they would be prevented by hordes of other people from getting near enough to ask for it. They could only yell from the edge of the crowd in the hope that Jesus might hear them above the general hub-bub. On this occasion, the ten lepers were lucky.

When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.

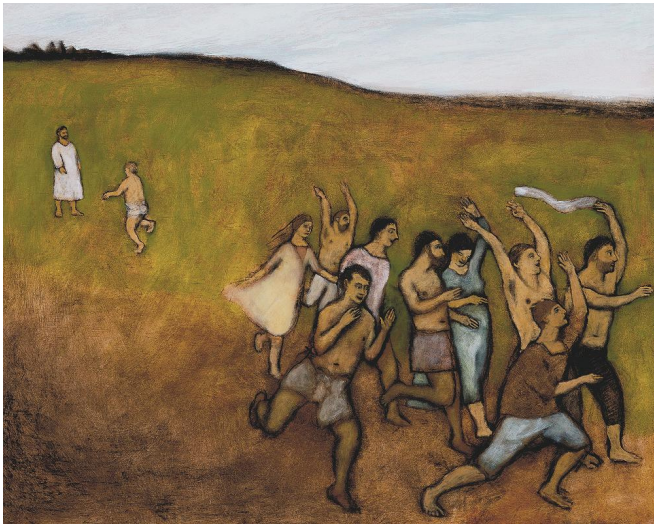
Luke 17.14

Even those who believed they had been cured were still prohibited from returning to ordinary society until their skin had been inspected and certified clean by the authority of a priest. Humiliation and further rejection would follow if the priest refused. So the ten lepers of this story were taking a risk – Jesus had not laid hands on them, or made any sign that he had in fact healed them – they only had his word for it. In fact, confirmation did not appear until they were already racing to find a priest. Their willingness to do that in faith could well have been part of the cure.

Jesus Healing Lepers



- What part would you say we have to play in our own healing?
- "Do you want to be made well?" (John 5.6)

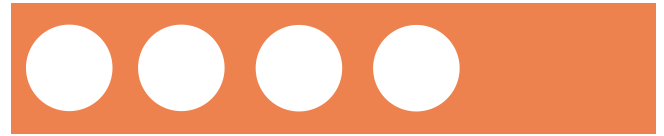


Brian Kershisnik

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?"

Luke 17:12-18

The stand-off between Jews and Samaritans had deep roots in biblical history, and was still alive and thriving in Jesus' time. One of his best-loved parables, that of the Good Samaritan, was deeply offensive to the audience that first heard it. This is because Jesus cast the Samaritan as the only one who was able to rise above the bigotry and prejudices of centuries to show mercy and compassion for the injured Jew,



after the Jew's own countrymen pass him by. That background emphasises Jesus' surprise that "this foreigner" was the only one who thought to run back to give thanks to God who worked that healing miracle through Jesus the Jew.

The Greek word for 'foreigner' is not used elsewhere in the New Testament. However, it is used in the inscription that excluded foreigners from entering the Jerusalem Temple.

The Temple was the dwelling place of God; only the faithful were welcome.

Jesus is connecting the healed man's thanks with his giving glory to God. This is now both a divine encounter and a restoration of relationship. The implicit message for the Pharisees is: even the Samaritans recognise Jesus as the son of God ...

- Do you identify with anyone in this healing story?
- Who gets the glory when you are healed?
- Who are the Samaritans in your church?
- Is healing a part of the ministry in your parish?



In New Zealand nowadays, few people remember to give thanks to God who works miracles of healing through modern medicine. The cure for that carelessness is simply to look up some of the fearful accounts of standard medical practice of even a short time ago. Childbearing, dentistry, setting of broken bones, and almost any internal problem were treated with routine barbarism that cheerfully ignored both the suffering of the patients and the true causes of illness. On the list of things to be grateful in modern life, anaesthetics, penicillin and many modern drugs must surely rank at the top.

HEALING

Giving thanks to God for healing gives God glory, but so does sharing your experience of healing with others. The wonder and relief you received from God can inspire and encourage.

- Have you had an experience of God's healing that you could share?

For many, the subject of divine healing is devastating. When we pray for healing for ourselves or those we love without receiving a miracle we can be left with 'mixed emotions.'

- How do you respond to people whose prayers have not been answered?
- How do we move from the grief of loss to thanksgiving for what was and might still be ...?
- Is death the ultimate moment of healing?

How does your parish acknowledge and give thanks for the healing work done in your community?

- What could you do to show your appreciation for all those who minister to the needs of others? To those who offer healing through anything from listening to surgery?

SALVATION, PEACE & JOY



Studying animals can help us understand ourselves, because we have a lot in common. However, animals have no concept of collective identity, and no thoughts about the good of the species. If mutual aid does not pay the individual, it simply doesn't happen. Given the right conditions, animals can learn to co-operate - wolves hunt together and horses scratch each others' itches. But they only do it when they get more benefit from co-operating than by going solo. Their own individual interests remain paramount. This cost-benefit rule is familiar to us as our own inborn tendency to "look after number one" and "if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours", especially in the world of commerce.



But we are also different from animals, because many of the things we do go beyond the rule of nature. The most profound happiness possible to ordinary people is when two lovers enter such close communion that they are able to drop their defences and to trust each other completely. In that state, each receives the total self-offering of the other, and so gives to the other something that neither can find for themselves, the unconditional affirmation of another person's love.



In our better moments, Christians can sometimes realise that, to be like him and to reach the highest pinnacles of the human spirit, it is not enough merely to control our self-interest, the default setting we inherited from our ancient ancestors; we must learn to abandon it altogether.

"The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate."

Rom 7.14-15

- Can we overcome our human nature on our own?
- What enables you to let go of your own self-interest?



Jesus recognised that, for us, that would be a form of death - we must enter a new life or, as he put it to Nicodemus on the rooftop that night, we must be born again. He also recognised that, for him, it would eventually mean the cross.



- How do you respond to Christ's words: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matt 16.24)
- If we must deny ourselves and follow Christ with our cross, what does self-care look like?

Gratitude and self-offering to God was Jesus' default setting throughout his mission. They empowered his every action.

"He told the crowd to sit on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so."

Mark 8.6

In the Celtic tradition there were prayers of blessing and thanksgiving for mundane moments: milking the cow, lighting the kindling, stepping over the threshold ...

- Where does God hear your prayer in day-to-day life?

Jesus's clear foreknowledge of the suffering to come was not enough to silence his overwhelming theme of thanksgiving to God throughout his life. This is demonstrated in his speech and actions at the Last Supper, as well as in his prayer for the disciples afterwards. In a supreme act of self-offering, Jesus put aside his self-interest for God's sake, and refused to take it up again even when threatened by death.

Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

Lk 22:19-20

Every time we hear the words of consecration at the Eucharist we are reminded to be grateful again for God's most precious gifts of salvation, peace and joy.

Eucharist is a Greek word that means thanksgiving. That's why we call our liturgical celebration of Holy Communion "The Great Thanksgiving Prayer". Although we tend to fixate on the Words of Institution (taken from Luke 22), they cannot stand in isolation.

It is right indeed, it is our joy and our salvation, holy Lord, almighty Father, everlasting God, at all times and in all places to give you thanks and praise through Christ your only Son.

ANZPB, 421

Gratitude is the fundamental disposition of worship. Our whole identity is to be informed by our corporate act of worship and celebration of Holy Communion. We are to be thankful members of the body of Christ who faithfully remember all that God has done for us through the bread and wine. As you prepare for Holy Week, turn your mind to the moments of salvation, know the peace of God that passes all understanding, and discover joy.



SALVATION
PEACE, & JOY

REFLECTIONS

What have I learnt?

What challenged me (and why)?

What am I most grateful for?

One new thing I can do each day to be more grateful ...

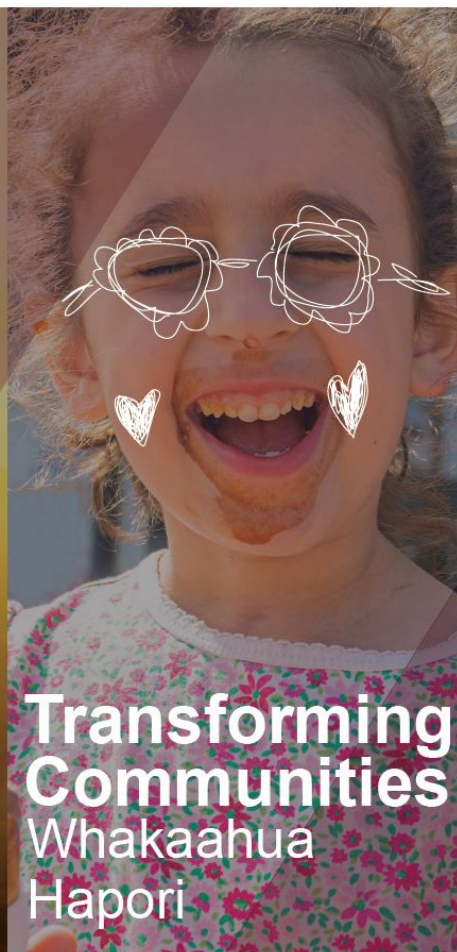
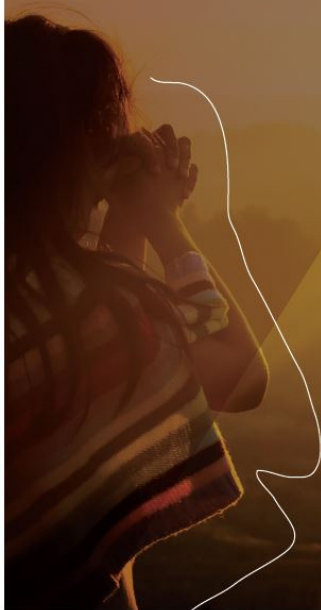
Notes, thoughts, questions and reflections ...

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We seek to be *A family in God, who are followers of Christ*

**Marked by
Gratitude**
Ngākau
Whakawhetai



**Transforming
Communities**
Whakaahua
Hapori

**Growing
Disciples**
Tupuranga
Ākonga



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