

The Gift of Thanks

Some years ago, I attended a lecture entitled, “Eucharist: Gratitude and Transcendence” by the social anthropologist Margaret Visser. Her focus was the central place of the Eucharist in Christian life as the most profound expression of gratitude. She unpacked the meaning of the word “thanks” in relation to the communal celebration of the Eucharist and its power to lead us to an intense transformation. I was moved to purchase her book *The Gift of Thanks** and found it as thought provoking as her presentation. Both have led me to a deeper reflection on the meaning of the Scriptures proclaimed today.

Both Naaman and the one returning leper in the Gospel represent the key concepts Visser develops. Gratitude flows from memory. She points out the derivation of the word “thanks” (danken in German) is related to the word “think” (denken) in German. From memory flows thanks. “The supreme thanks would be thinking—remembering—the gift of our being.” That’s what those two grateful lepers experienced. It is what we are called to experience in every Eucharist.

There are then, in the remembering and the giving thanks, two essential elements. First the memory of the gift given leads the recipient to a profound sense of humility. For the two grateful lepers, humbly embracing their story was the foundation of their profession of thanks. They understood that what they were before and what they had now become through the gift of healing could never be repaid, so their only recourse was to give thanks and praise. Genuine gratitude would brook no impulse to return the favor. This we have seen in Jesus' urging his disciples earlier in Luke's Gospel:

*...when you hold a banquet, invite the poor,
the crippled, the lame, the blind;
blessed indeed will you be
because of their inability to repay you.*

“Returning the favor” runs the risk of diminishing the original gift.

This has implications for our celebration of the Eucharist. It seems to me that, as we gather around the altar, it cannot be in any way an attempt to “repay” God for the gift of our being or the gift of our redemption through the death and resurrection of the Christ. One of the prefaces to the Eucharist Prayer lays it on the line:

*You have no need of our praise,
yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift.
Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness,
but only makes us grow in your grace,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The second requirement of genuine gratitude is freedom. Our celebration of the Eucharist should never be considered an obligation. Gathering as a community of faith to give thanks “is itself your gift.” If there is one single obstacle to genuine thanksgiving in what we celebrate each week, it is the misguided notion that we are obliged to give thanks. What is the quality of thanks offered out of fear of punishment? How would we feel if our generosity to another prompted gratitude out of fear? In the past—and regretfully even in some places today—to get us to understand the necessity of giving thanks, we were beaten over the head with the threat of eternal damnation in the fires of hell.

Our celebration of the Eucharist must be rooted in our freedom to give thanks without fear. The saddest part of Luke’s story of the ten lepers is the understanding of the plight of the nine. As Visser sees it: “Jubilant over their regained health as they are, in their thanklessness and thoughtlessness they are lost.” They have lost the experience of

genuine gratitude which creates a transcendent relationship with the Giver. In the Eucharist this would be especially sad; it might even be sacrilegious.

There have been attempts in the last few years to "improve" the way we celebrate the Sunday Eucharist, some of which have enhanced the celebration; some of which, like the "new" translation of the Mass prayers, have most decidedly detracted from it. But words and rubrics do not guarantee an authentic celebration of the fundamental elements of genuine gratitude. Those cannot be legislated. In fact any attempt to achieve those elements through legislation would be a supreme exercise in futility.

The word Eucharist, from the Greek *eucharistia*, means to give thanks. But, thanks not given freely and humbly would fail to fulfill the true meaning of genuine gratitude. May this Sunday celebration lead to a full, conscious, and active participation in that reality.

*Visser, Margaret. *The Gift of Thanks: The Roots and Rituals of Gratitude*.
New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008