

What shall I return to the Lord?

Merci. Gracias. Grazie. Danke. Arigatō. Xièxiè.

All those words mean ‘Thank you’ and you probably recognise most, if not all, of them. The word for ‘thank you’ is one of the first we tend to learn when we set out to learn a foreign language or even just visit a foreign country.

As I’ve reflected before, humans are relational beings, we live in community with one another – sometimes more deeply than others, of course – and with some people more deeply than others.

As we go about our lives we interact with other people. Whether it’s here at church, or at the shops, or on the roads, or with medical professionals, and we acknowledge what those people do for us. It doesn’t really matter if they’re paid by us, or paid by someone else, or they do it as a volunteer, I think our natural response is to say ‘thank you’ or equivalent.

Sometimes that is a quick thanks to the person at the checkout at the supermarket, or the person who handed you an order of service when you arrived at church, sometimes it’s a quick wave to the person who let you merge into traffic, sometimes it’s a small gift for the neighbours who collected your mail while you were on holidays.

But sometimes it’s much more than that: I know I’ve spent an hour and a half in a dentist’s chair, having some quite painful and uncomfortable things done, but still my inclination when I got up afterwards was to say, ‘thank you’. To be fair, part of that ‘thank you’ might have been ‘thank you that it’s over’ but it was still ‘thank you for what you did for me’.

Giving thanks to others is an important part of life.

When we have small children around us, we tend to naturally teach them the importance of giving thanks – ‘say ta’ we tell them.

Sometimes our thanks are stronger than others, and we use stronger language, “Thank you very much”, “Thank you from the bottom of my heart’... or our thanks are expressed in tokens or gifts of gratitude.

And sometimes, our thanks will be so great we can't properly express our gratitude. Nothing we can say or do will ever sum up the gratitude we feel. Sometimes people say that owe others a 'debt of gratitude' and that debt may never be truly repaid.

For us, who follow Jesus, we have a debt of gratitude for all he has done for us. We are blessed to come to know Jesus, we have been blessed time and time again by God throughout our lives. How do we say 'thank you' to God for all of that? What can we ever do, in gratitude?

In our reading today from Psalm 116, the Psalmist asks, "What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me?"

What shall – what shall – we, each one of us – and all of us together as St Ives Uniting Church – return to the Lord for all his goodness to us? How do we say 'thank you' to God?

Normally, when we receive a gift from some friend or loved one, at Christmas or on a birthday, we like to show our appreciation.... And the psalmist's question demands a response – what shall we return to the Lord for all his goodness to us? Shall we praise more or do more or give more money, or give more time, or pray more?

Well, in response, the psalmist says he "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord." In holding up the metaphorical cup of salvation, he is praising God. And in calling on the name of the Lord, he is praying to God. He is keeping God at the centre of his life. Not calling on a king, or a country, or a philosophy, or on his own wealth or achievements, but calling on the name of the Lord.

The psalmist goes on to say he will keep God's commandments – he says he will fulfil his vows to the Lord, and he will do it in the presence of all his people.

How do you feel about that?

Because our modern culture often tells us that religion – faith – is a private matter, "Yes, it's okay to have religion, but don't go on about it". But for Christians, it shouldn't be a private matter – it is a personal one - but it

should also be a public one. We are called to declare our faith publicly, to be witnesses to Jesus wherever we may be.

After all, Jesus said to his disciples “...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

And even more famously, in John’s gospel (Jn 13:34-35), Jesus told them “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

People will often tell you that St Francis of Assisi said “Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary use words?” St Francis isn’t recorded as saying that, but it strikes a chord with many people who think that Christians talk about the gospel but don’t live it out. That is often – too often – a valid criticism, of course. But if we try and witness using actions alone... well, how will people ever know who we are witnessing for?

I don’t think the witness that we are called to is standing on a street corner wearing a sandwich board, waving a bible and shouting at people that the end is nigh. But it is to be seen as the people of God, doing the work of God in this world, and loving each other – as much as Jesus loved his followers – and telling people the good news. It’s not an easy thing to do. Sometimes it will be hard, sometimes heartbreaking. Sometimes painful. The people of God, the followers of Jesus, are not exempted from suffering. Jesus said his followers needed to take up their cross and follow him (Luke 9:23), and that can be daunting.

Why would we choose to do it? Why? Well, I think it comes back to the psalmist’s question “What shall I return to the Lord for all his goodness to me?” we need to remember the cost of what God has done for the psalmist and for us – God gave up his only son, to die on that cross at Calvary. God’s goodness to the psalmist – and God’s goodness to us – far exceeds what we could ever return to the Lord.

In the face of that, the psalmist reflects that “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants.”

But even having contemplated that, he declares “Truly I am your servant, Lord; I serve you just as my mother did;” He is part of the people of God, with his mother before him, and the faithful of all the ages. - because he acknowledges that God has freed him from his chains.

Remember Charles Wesley’s words in the hymn *And Can It Be*: “I woke, the dungeon flamed with light! My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee”. The experience that he described in that hymn is, I think, the experience of the psalmist. The freeing from chains, and the following of God, in thanks.

Without Jesus we are slaves of sin and death. But through Jesus, we are freed from that slavery, free from the metaphoric chains of sin and death. Free to respond to God.

And then the psalmist again writes of his response to God:

I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the Lord.

He will give up some of what he has as a thank offering, just as Christians continue to do with their freewill offerings, and in their donations to charity, and in their giving up of their time for others.

Once more he says he will call on the name of the Lord. He will praise God for his saving grace. So often I think we get caught up in all the things we have to do as Christians and as a church, but praising God should be central to our Christian lives. The psalmist repeats this phrase “calling on the name of the Lord” in this psalm because it is not something to be done once, but something that needs to be part of the cycle of our lives. The debt of gratitude that we have will always be there, so we should always be thankful. That debt of gratitude won’t be repaid – can’t be repaid – and that’s okay.

Society generally holds that rewards come to us because we do the right thing. Because we work hard. Because we are good. Or sometimes, just because we’re lucky.

It’s a very human response. And even in the church we find that it’s a common attitude. The harder we work, the more God will love us. And that

attitude can be a helpful thing to the church – if we view it simply as an organisation.

After all, if you are running a business or an organisation, you want its employees or its members to work hard. That's what leads to success, doesn't it?

But that attitude, the harder we work, the more God will love us. Can also be unhelpful. In fact it can be destructive: Because if we think "The harder we work, the more God will love us", it follows, logically, that if we don't work hard enough, God won't love us anymore.

We, as Christians, need to make sure we don't fall into thinking that. CS Lewis wrote that. "The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us."

That reflects John's writing in his first letter, where we read "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us" (1 John 4:10)

God loves us all. Young and old. Rich and poor.

Hard worker and not so hard worker.

Whatever our backgrounds, whatever our traditions, God loves us.

And despite whatever we might have done, God loves us.

CS Lewis continued though: "...but that God will make us good because he loves us."

God will change us. He will make us better.

Through the working of the Holy Spirit, we will become more Christ like. It's not an instant thing. It's a process. Or as we like to say in the Uniting Church, it's a journey.

And indeed, we won't be made perfect until God puts all things right, at the end of that journey - when Jesus returns in glory.

And it's a process that doesn't simply happen to us. It's a process that happens within us, and we are part of that process.

God reaches out to us all in his Son, and all we need to do is respond. To turn to him in faith. And as the Holy Spirit works within us, we need to respond to that too, we need to be open to that happening and be part of the process.

The beginning of Psalm 116, which we had as our responsive psalm today, says, “I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.”

God doesn’t love the psalmist because the psalmist loved God first. Rather the psalmist responds to God, because God heard the psalmist’s cry for mercy. The psalmist responded to God because God responded to the psalmist.

And then in verse two he says, “Because [God] turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.”

Because God showed love toward the psalmist (he turned his ear, he heard the cry for mercy), the psalmist is going to call on God – to praise him, to pray to him, to follow him for the psalmist’s whole life.

The psalmist didn’t earn God’s love, he was in a dark place - as we read “The cords of death entangled [him], the anguish of the grave came over [him]; [he] was overcome by distress and sorrow”.

But even when he was in anguish, he responded to God’s love. He could do nothing to save himself, but he called on the name of the Lord: “Lord, save me!”

That cry to God always reminds me of that line from the hymn Rock of Ages: “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling”.

Nothing that we can do can save us. But God’s saving grace is there for us all in the cross of Christ.

The psalm is a psalm of praise, and it ends, as so many of them do, with the simple words “Praise the Lord”, or, in Hebrew “Hallelu Yah”.

As we join in that cry of praise, let’s move away from worldly ideas of earning love and earning favour, and truly appreciate that God loved us even though we were not worthy of that love. He sent his son into his fallen creation not to destroy it, not to judge it, but to save it and save us. To offer

himself to die in our place, so that each of us can be reconciled with God.
Freeing us from the chains of sin and death, and opening the way to
everlasting life.

And as we do those things, let us praise God and pray to him always.

As the psalmist did in ancient times, let us continue to do today.

Praise God.

Hallelujah.

Amen.