



# Preaching Gratitude

Sunday 1 October 2023

Some notes for a sermon from the lectionary

Choose and adapt any elements that are helpful for your context - a 5 or 10 minute talk, or an illustration or quote for a longer sermon. Some visual ideas that could support an all-age talk are included, along with suggested prayers.

Exodus 17.1-7 ~ Psalm 78.1-4,12-16 ~ Philippians 2.1-13 ~ Matthew 21.23-32

As Generosity Week concludes, the Psalmist leads us in a response of gratitude for God's provision. This is quite a contrast with what's shown in the Exodus reading: the Israelites in the wilderness have moved on from grumbling to... quarrelling! We can all become forgetful and even ungrateful.

But as Paul writes to the Philippian church, when we are planted in the soil of gratitude, we will grow in self-giving love. As we give thanks for all that God has given us in Christ, Christ's mind grows in ours.

**“We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord”.**

*If you invited the congregation last week to collect 'manna' of thankfulness during the week, recognising God's provision, start your sermon by inviting people to share.*



With or without a visual aid, kick off with your own thanksgiving! This can involve every generation.

You could:

- ask someone from each decade of life represented in your church to share something they are grateful for;
- share 'five finger' prayers of thanksgiving: the thumb is for thanks to God, the giver of every gift, the pointing finger for all those who point to Him, the tallest finger for those who lead in any sphere - schools, hospitals, politics, agriculture, business. The fourth finger is the weakest, and reminds us to give thanks for those who care, and the little finger, for those younger than us;
- You could make 'grace cubes' to use at mealtimes (this QR code links for a template);
- Give thanks for all those involved in church. Ask them to stand up, group by group - those who serve by welcoming, who work with children, who sit on the PCC, who pray, and end by asking everyone present to stand.

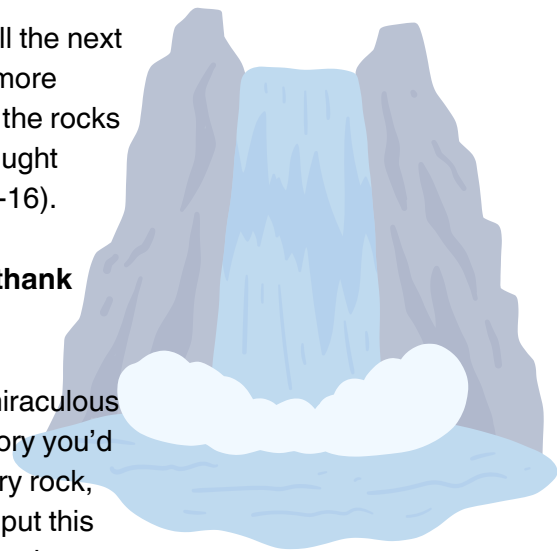


**Remember to give thanks to God for the generous giving which enables your church's ministry and mission.**

As you do this, you're joining in with the Psalmist (Psalm 78): "we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord" (v4). He goes on to be more specific: "He did miracles in the sight of their ancestors" (v12), "He split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them water as abundant as the seas; he brought streams out of a rocky crag and made water flow down like rivers" (V15-16).

### **What are the specific stories in your church's life which you can thank God for together?**

Last week, we remembered the miracle of the manna, and this week, miraculous water. If bread fell on your head out of the sky, surely this would be a story you'd keep on telling. If you drank water which flowed from an unpromising, dry rock, you'd probably remember it. So why does the Psalmist feel the need to put this miracle into song so that the community had reason to regularly sing it and remember? Why did the Israelites need a liturgy, **a practice of thanks**, when they had so much miraculous reason to thank God 'spontaneously'?



Henry Ward Beecher, abolitionist, preacher, and campaigner for women's suffrage, wrote "If one should give me a dish of sand and tell me there were particles of iron in it, I might look for them with my eyes and search for them with my clumsy fingers and be unable to detect them. But let me take a magnet and sweep through it, and it will draw to itself the almost invisible particles. The unthankful heart, like my finger in the sand, discovers no blessings. **But let the thankful heart sweep through life, and as a magnet finds the iron, so it will find in every day some heavenly blessing.**"

*Could you try this as a visual aid?*

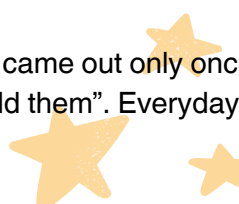
Habits of thanksgiving open our eyes to God's good gifts. Practices of gratitude remind us of God's faithfulness.

The Exodus reading reminds us that we're forgetful, and sometimes our faith fails. Even with miraculous manna and quail in their bellies, the Israelites become fearful and turn to human solutions when things are difficult. Haven't we all often done the same? There are hard, wilderness days when *feeling* thankful or faith-filled isn't possible. Nor does the Psalmist lead us to *feel* thankful. Instead, we're invited to *give* thanks. Martin B Copenhaver puts it this way "we come... to offer our thanks to God so that we might some day be thankful".\*\*

God's goodness isn't changed by our changeable feelings. Gracious and generous, He positions Himself in front of a rock and invites Moses to strike it. Paul will later see Christ in this position of solidarity and self-giving ("they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ". 1 Corinthians 10.4).

Poet Ralph Waldo Emerson said that "if the stars came out only once a year, everybody would stay up all night to behold them". Everyday blessings sometimes get hidden by familiarity.

**Practices of gratitude – like those embedded in the lives and sacred texts of the Israelites – open our eyes again.**



### **Eucharist as thanksgiving**

If your service is a celebration of Holy Communion, then at its heart is a prayer of grateful thanksgiving - the Eucharistic prayer. (*Eucharistein* means 'to give thanks' in Greek).



This link offers specially prepared Eucharistic liturgy from the Church of England

\*\* Copenhaver, MB. 'Learning to Give Thanks'. *Christian Century*. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-10/learning-give-thanks>

## “Have the same mindset as that of Christ Jesus”.

Today's reading from the letter to the Philippians features what's sometimes known as the 'Christ song'. Paul may have been quoting words the church already knew well; our sung worship is one way in which we practice gratitude when we gather. The words rejoice in the self-giving love of God in Christ.



In her novel, *Lydia*\*, Paula Gooder imagines the Philippian church community that Paul was affectionately writing to. She threads this 'Christ song' through the novel, with one character in particular humming it so that it becomes the undercurrent of the whole book.

The story she tells contains a wonderful, grace-filled twist. With the song in our minds, we can see how this counter-culturally generous action is birthed in a church richly and regularly nourished in gratitude to God.

### What does this look like for us today?

Remind people how they can express gratitude to God with **their worship, their words, and their wallets!**



Some individuals find 'gratitude journals' a helpful way of practicing thanks regularly.

What might it look like to have a church 'gratitude journal'?

#### ABC of thanks!

Lead your congregation in an alphabet of thanksgiving. Invite people to shout out things they are thankful for, for every letter of the alphabet: animals, bikes, Christmas, dogs, ears, the foodbank....

#### An enacted confession from givinggrace.org

*Invite people to hold out both hands as if receiving something:*

Dear God, thank you for giving us so much to enjoy in our lives and in our church.

**Forgive us when we are ungrateful and when we complain.**

*Invite people to clasp both hands together tightly:*

**Dear God, sometimes we want to hold very tightly to all the things we have.**

Forgive us when we are greedy and when we are mean.

*Invite people to turn hands towards the floor and open as if letting go of something:*

**Dear God, we want to use all that we have to help other people.**

Forgive us when we are selfish and when we forget to care.

#### Gratitude scavenger hunt

Make a list of things to find that children and adults might be thankful for:

- something that's your favourite colour;
- something made by a skilled person;
- something that smells lovely;
- something that makes you laugh;
- something very useful.

See who can tick off the whole list first!

More ideas here from the Church of England for practices of thanks with children.

