

SERMON FOR THANKSGIVING (Cape Town - 7 September 2008)

Text: Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased (Heb.13:15-16).

Depending on what you are going through right now, it will either be easy or rather difficult to celebrate “Thanksgiving”. Sometimes life is so stressed and you have so many worries that “thanksgiving” is the last thing on your mind.

But this is the very reason why the church has set one Sunday in the Church Year aside for the single purpose of celebrating “Thanksgiving.”

The Sunday “Thanksgiving” is a time for quiet reflection and stock taking of life. And maybe as we do so today, you will leave this church later on with your heart full of praise and thanks for a most wonderful God.

It has often been pointed out that “thanking” is preceded by “thinking”. In other words, “thanking” doesn’t just happen out of the blue. But it is the result of a process of consciously “thinking” about something.

It happens for example, when you receive a gift. You yourself will know, what makes you grateful for a gift is not necessarily the size or the value of the gift. But gratefulness evolves when you start thinking about the significance and meaning of the gift. A small flower may communicate: Somebody has been thinking of me, somebody loves me. And it is only then, when you “think” about it, that your heart is filled with true gratitude.

However this may also mean, that if our heart lacks gratitude, the reason for it is that most probably you never stop to think. The worries and the stresses of life chase you from one point to the other, and you don’t stop to think.

Well, I am glad you came to church this morning, because this is where at least once a week we stop and think. And I believe that as you do so regularly (either every day, or every Sunday) your thankfulness will increase proportionally. Because an attitude of gratitude is the product of careful cultivation, like a plant which you water “every” day, and it never stops blossoming.

The result of this can be quite remarkable. This last week I came across the story of Matthew Hendry, a well-known Bible scholar, who one day was robbed by a group of gangsters. This is what he wrote in his diary:

Let me be thankful first, because I was never robbed before; second, because, although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because, although they took everything, it wasn't much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed?

Believe me, here is a man, who made the conscious effort to stop and think. And as he did so, he discovered so many reasons to be thankful, even when robbed.

The situation of a sermon text is quite similar to that of Matthew Hendry. In fact, in some ways it is much worse. At time when this letter to the Hebrews was written, the Roman emperor had just released a decree, that the Christian faith was deemed to be illegal in the whole Roman empire. Anybody Christian practising his faith would be severely persecuted.

Now that is reason enough to moan and to complain. But listen to what the apostle writes to his congregation. On hearing the news, he writes: ***“Through Jesus let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise.”***

That is extraordinary. He calls on the congregation to *praise God*. And the words “through Jesus” indicate the basis for this praise. It is not that the apostle minimises the threat that faced the congregation. But the words “through Jesus” draw attention to the one constant in our lives. By calling on the congregation to bring a “sacrifice” of praise, he reminds it of the sacrifice that Jesus brought. Outside of Jerusalem, on Mount Calvary, Jesus gave his life. And his resurrection three days later confirmed: The sacrifice for our sins has been accepted. We are reconciled with God. “Shalom - Peace be with you!” With these words the resurrected Jesus greeted his disciples every time he appeared to them.

No emperor can take that away. And even when the persecution did break out a few years later, and Christian after Christian lost his or her life, they rejoiced. Early in the 2nd century, the Greek historian Aristeides wrote to a friend:

These Christians are amazing, every time one of them passes from this world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God, and they escort his body with songs and thanksgiving as if he was setting out from one place to another nearby.

Thanksgiving is cultivated in the heart “through Jesus”. But exactly how is expressed? The apostle gives two answers:

First, he says: It is expressed by the “fruit of our lips” that “confess his name.”

In other words, thankfulness finds expression by the *words* that come from our lips. It happens through words of praise, or songs of praise. We have noticed it so often. If

people are happy, they start singing. If we win the Rugby, like last week they sing. A congregation that experiences God's grace, sings.

But more important, is "what" we sing. The apostle talks about "the fruit of our lips that confess his name." We don't sing "dancing Matilda" (like the Aussies) or "Ole, ole" (as our Rugby supporters do) . We confess the name of Christ.

But here is something to remember. The Greek word for confessing means: "declaring openly", or "declaring publically"

This means, praising Christ is hardly a "private" or "individual" matter. It is not confined to my home, where I whisper to God: "I praise you, O Lord". Throughout Scripture you see Christians coming together to praise God.

Sometimes people ask me: Why should we go to Church? There are many good reasons, of course. But one of the reasons are: Here the family of God's meets to sing his praises. After a service you may go home and say: "The sermon didn't speak to me today, but it was so nice praising God. I could identify with every single song we sang today"

Praising God finds expression through the "fruit of our lips".

But there is another side to the coin. The apostle continues and says: Praising God also expresses itself in the actions of our hands. We read (the apostle saying): : ***"Do not forget to do good and to share with others."***

Praise of God is complete only when the lips are complimented by the actions of our hands. This is something the prophet Amos already highlighted. Speaking shortly before the Babylonian exile, he once entered the temple of Jerusalem, and when the people gathered for worship, he shouted: ***"Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps [says the Lord, our God]"*** (5:23). And the people said "why". And God said: Songs mean nothing if the hands forget to do good, the poor and the widows and neglected..

Bottom line is: The hands express true praise and thanks. A person that has been touched by the grace of God, opens his hands, becomes generous.

The apostle concludes this passage with the words: ***"For such sacrifices are pleasing to God."*** I imagine God is pleased with whatever we give. But sometimes, in times of need, God may call on us to give a "sacrifice". In others words, I don't just give of what is left over, my abundance, but I make a sacrifice because somebody is need.

And by the way, there is a reason why in ancient Israel the "thank offering" was called

the first-fruit. When people planted a field, the *first-fruits* that were harvested were always taken to the temple as an offer of praise. Or when in a new season, lambs were born, the *first* lambs were taken to the temple as thank offering. It was a way to express or to proclaim: God everything comes from you. The “first” I get, I therefore give back to you.

That is praising God with my hands! I give generously even *before* I have secured my own life. And I do so because I know, The God to whom I give is able to make me “*rich in every way so that I can be generous on every occasion.*” That is what Paul writes to the Corinthians (2 Cor.9:11).

I praise God not only when I see or experience his blessing. I praise him all the time, continually, through Jesus Christ. I praise him both with my lips and my hands. And those are the sacrifices that please him. Amen.

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