

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**St Faith's Patronal Festival**  
**'Gratitude is the Heart of Thanksgiving'**  
**Plumstead – 5 October 2008**

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Readings:

Numbers 27:12-23 – Moses appoints Joshua to succeed him

Phil 3:12-21 – Pressing on towards the goal

Mt 21:33-43 – The parable of the vineyard and the tenants (Ingratitude!!)

May I speak in the name of the Lord, who does for us far more than we can ever ask or imagine.

Dear brothers and sisters of St Faiths, it is a great delight to be with you today on your Patronal Festival.

Though being an Archbishop as well as a Diocesan Bishop means that the Province is always making demands on my time; one of the joys of being in Cape Town is gradually getting to know the parishes and the people.

So I am particularly glad to be with you today.

I also hope that many of you were able to enjoy our day at Bishops last month – and certainly, I am very grateful for all the hard work that Fr Basil did as one of the organizing committee.

Speaking of being glad and being grateful brings me to the theme I have been given for this morning's sermon, namely 'Gratitude is the heart of Thanksgiving.'

As I said in my Charge, at my installation way back in March (it sometimes seems a long time ago – though sometimes only yesterday!) – as I said then, 'Christian thinkers from the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez to Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, insist that gratitude must be our first response to all we receive from God in Christ.'

In fact, when we pause to consider, we realise that all that we have, and more than that, all that is, all that exists – creation itself, and all of life – is received from God in Christ.

Perhaps you know the story about the scientists who think they have discovered the secret of creating life. So they challenge God to a duel, and God accepts.

'You go first' they say to God. So God bends down, takes a handful of earth, spits on it to make mud, rolls it in his hand to create the shape of a puppy, and breathes into it, and off it runs, wagging its tail, full of exuberant life.

'OK' God says to the scientists, 'now it's your turn.'

They too bend down to take up a handful of earth. 'No, no, no!' says God 'You can't just use my earth – create your own!'

Everything that is, everything that exists is first of all a gift from God.

More than that, God does not just create and then stand back. Our every moment of existence is sustained by the continuing presence of his life-giving Spirit.

This gift of life itself is our first reason to be thankful.

And then comes the gift of restored life, won for us through the gift of Jesus' self-giving on the cross.

This is what we celebrate in the Eucharist each week. Eucharist is the New Testament word that means giving thanks – which is why, on page 117 of our prayer books, you will find that the heart of today's service is called 'The Great Thanksgiving'.

As the preface to the service says, on p.101 (and it is worth taking time to read this if you have never done so – but please, not while I am speaking!!) 'In Christ this act of worship is our eucharist, that is, our thanksgiving to God for his inexpressible love in giving his only Son for us: Lamb of God, bearer of our sins, redeemer of the world.'

That's a lot to be thankful for!

We also celebrate the promise of life after death – and we can give thanks for this as well, for we know that what God promises, God delivers.

*[OMIT THIS PART IN ITALICS IF THEY DO NOT READ THE OT LESSON!]*

*This is one of the messages of the Old Testament passage we heard read*

*In this, the Lord tells Moses to go up onto a mountain that overlooks the Jordan valley and the promised land beyond. Moses himself will not enter it – but he is told to look, and to see, and to realise that God promises; and what God promises, God gives.]*

By the way, let me say that the readings we have heard are those set for today, the Twenty-seventh Sunday of the Year. Unless other readings are set for a particular festival, my habit is to use these as the 'default option', and it is remarkable how often, by God's grace, they provide words to guide us. So I am grateful for these, too!

Mind you, the gospel reading is useful in that it gives us a good example of the opposite of gratitude!

Jesus tells this parable about those who ought to uphold true faith, the faith that brings life. But they fail to see that this is a gift, entrusted to them – they want to own it for themselves, and control life on their terms.

Like Adam, their sin is to think that they can do without God, and manage their lives just how they want.

It is as though their attitude to life is 'What can I get out of this – what am I grasping for?' when it should be 'What have I received in this – what am I grateful for?'

Let me give this contrast again – it is the essence of the 'attitude of gratitude' to which God calls us.

Is your life focussed on 'What can I get out of this – what am I grasping for?' or is the heart of your life to say 'What have I received from this – what am I grateful for?'

St Paul warns the Philippians not to be like those whose 'god is their belly' – who are always greedy, always wanting more and more and more – not only food, but 'stuff', whether it is the latest cell-phone or trainers or car or fashion sun-glasses (well, I hope the spring is properly here now!) – or perhaps more power, more status, along with more money.

OK, so it is nice to have nice things – but we must not buy into the consumerist myth that we always need more and newer and better than we have already. Consumerism is not the path to happiness or satisfaction. And if we are not careful, some of what we desire leads us on the path towards the destruction of our planet.

No, says, St Paul – our minds are not set on such a limited, earth-bound, goal, for we are citizens of heaven.

So we are those who live with gratitude for our life – for our creation and for our redemption.

More than that, says St Paul, we should live as those who know that God will transform us so that we become just like Jesus in all his glory.

And this is not just 'for later', when we get to heaven. At the beginning of the letter, St Paul writes 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you, will bring it to completion.'

God is at work already in all of our lives – and the real heart of what I want to talk about today, is how it is we learn to see God at work in our own lives more clearly, especially in the little things.

I think this is particularly hard for us as South African Christians. For many decades, the life of the Church was dominated by one big problem, which had one simple answer – apartheid was wrong, and it had to go.

Well, apartheid has gone – and now we live the increasingly normal life of democracy. But to us this sometimes does not feel very normal. If you are used to big questions with simple answers, it is hard to get used to society that has all sorts of issues on the table at any one time, often very complicated, with complex relationships between them – and there are no simple answers.

If it were easy to know what to do, and how to do it, surely we would have dealt with the problems of the economy, education, health, housing, employment, and on and on and on! But as anyone in any other democracy will tell you, normal life is full of mess and muddle.

Sometimes too people here worry that the church has lost its vision – because Christians often disagree on questions such as the death penalty, or human sexuality – and all sides, who are honestly trying to discern the right way forward, find justification in the interpretation of Scripture.

No, it is not the case that the church has lost its vision. It is just that now we need a vision of God that is adequate to our current circumstances – we no longer need a vision that is focused almost totally on one question, apartheid.

Our focus now is on learning to see God at work in the 'little things'. We have to train the eyes of our souls to see the finger prints of God in the details of our lives, and especially in the mess and the muddle.

Cultivating the 'attitude of gratitude' is one absolutely vital way of doing this.

If you can make a habit of this, it is one of the most powerful ways I know of learning to walk more closely with God.

This is not my idea, by the way! It has been around for almost 500 years – rooted in the tradition that some of you might know, of St Ignatius of Loyola, and what is often called his 'Examen of Conscience'.

But it is neither an exam, nor is it about our consciences!

Instead, it is a way of becoming more aware of God prompting and moulding our feelings and our reactions, to circumstances and events, and leading us in his paths.

Let me explain.

Perhaps, like me, you had a hectic morning getting to church on time – perhaps you felt yourself under pressure, and hassled by all sorts of frustrations – and even now, those things, and the things you have to do when you get home, are racing round your head and heart.

Now, just pause. Take a deep breath... and breathe out. And again ...

As you are sitting quietly, breathing gently, remember that you are in the presence of the God who loves you more than you can ever understand – even though sometimes, you might feel waves of love touching you. Yes, God loves you.

Perhaps you want to close your eyes, and say to yourself 'God loves me'.

Perhaps it helps if you place your hand over your heart, and think of God's loving presence with all those who have given their lives to Jesus.

Now, slowly and gently, ask Jesus to bring to your heart, to your mind, the moment this morning for which you are most grateful.

[Pause]

Ignore those things for which you are least grateful – even if they press in on your awareness. In the stillness, let God bring to your heart the moment for which you are most grateful.

There, what do you have? I am sure there is something – perhaps a surprising something!

Perhaps there was a moment of shared love or appreciation with a family member, a friend. Perhaps there was some unexpected coincidence. Perhaps something difficult fell easily into place. Perhaps something *didn't* go as badly as you feared!

For me, the moment for which I realise that I am most grateful this morning is .....

So, I want to give thanks to God for that: because I recognise his care, his love, present in that moment.

Take a moment to say thank you to God, for your own moment. And see how it reflects the nature of God himself.

OK, so we have just considered the few hours since we got up.

Now imagine what a difference it would make if you took ten minutes, some time this evening, to have this slow gentle moment with the Lord – and to let him bring to your heart, your mind, perhaps one, perhaps many, moments in the whole of today, for which you are grateful.

I think you would be amazed at the long list – and how much evidence that you had never noticed, of God present and at work in the little details of life! Just give thanks for each one, as it comes to you. And then let him surface another. If the bad moments also push in and demand attention, just leave them to one side for a moment, and let the gratitude of your day flow through you.

And when you have done with thanksgiving, then talk to God about those events with which you struggled, for which you are not grateful – though perhaps you have already found sparks of light and hope and love, even in those tough times!

Perhaps you cannot do this every day, though this is the best habit to cultivate. Instead – or even as well – you can sit down and reflect on a whole week. At New Year, or on particular anniversaries, you might like to look back over the whole of a year. Or you could do this whenever some phase of life comes to completion.

And you do not have to do it alone. You can also do it with a spouse, with the whole family – just all be quiet together, and then take turns so that each one can share what is their most grateful moment, while others listen carefully. After you have all shared, then there might be things that you want to discuss, to help one another grow in Christ.

What I have found, by doing this – at least sometimes, though I have to keep reminding myself to maintain this good habit – is that it helps me become more aware of God at work in the very moments when I am receiving his grace; and so I am able to feel gratitude there and then. More than this, being aware of his presence, his prompting, often helps me to react and respond in his way.

Or perhaps, through feeling ingratitude, he teaches me about where I ought to change my attitude to others; or perhaps instead, I am right to feel ingratitude, if it is a circumstance that is not glorifying to God, or not part of his plan for my life, and he wants to move me in another direction.

Let me give an example .... [either positive or negative ...]

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, 'gratitude is the heart of thanksgiving'. If we learn to live with gratitude, we will find that our eyes are opened to see God at work in our lives, and to sense his leading of us; and our lives will be filled with an increasing knowledge of his loving presence.

I pray that you may indeed cultivate this 'attitude of gratitude' and find that 'Gratitude is the Heart of Thanksgiving'

Amen.