

An Attitude of Gratitude

by Rev. Robert Griffith

When the Apostle Paul signed off in his first letter to the Thessalonian Church, he exhorted them to, *“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”* (1 Thess. 5:16-18)

Giving thanks in all circumstances is not easy and yet God has been encouraging us to do just that since the beginning of our time on earth. From cover to cover in the Bible we find exhortations and encouragement to give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. But we humans have always wrestled with this challenge of being thankful when there’s so much to complain about or be fearful of or resent and be negative about. At times it seems easier to want what we don’t have, ignore what we do have and covet what our neighbour has! We tend to worship the past and fear the future. Such attitudes then cripple us in the present and rob us of the abundant life which God promised us in Christ.

I have found it fascinating during my lifetime to see the extent to which North American culture has been imported and embraced in our country. Six weeks ago it was Halloween. There is nothing remotely Australian or edifying or culturally positive about Halloween, and yet each year it gets bigger and bigger here. We have also seen how Hollywood has done more to define the values and morals of our younger generations than their parents, grandparents or the Bible ever did. It seems there are no import restrictions when it comes to American culture. But there’s one huge part of American life which we haven’t really embraced. That could be because its roots are very specific to American history, or it could be because our attitude and culture are not conducive to this tradition. At the end of November each year across North America, hundreds of millions of people press the pause button on their busy lives as they gather with family and friends for what they call ‘Thanksgiving.’

This annual tradition dates back to 1621 when a little band of Puritans set out on the *Mayflower* for Virginia, only to get blown off course and finally come to shore hundreds of miles to the north. As soon as they arrived the cold Massachusetts winter hit them really hard and more than half of them had died. When the time for the first anniversary of their landing rolled around, discussion arose as to how it should be observed. Some proposed a Day of Mourning, when attention would be focused on all those who lay in unmarked graves in foreign soil. But the others protested strongly and said, *“No, a Day of Thanksgiving would be more appropriate. After all, fifty of us have survived. We have gathered in a good harvest. The Indians have been our friends. Let’s focus on what we have going for us, not on what we have going against us.”*

That was the turning point for all that followed. Had those Pilgrims chosen to mourn and complain and count their losses, rather than give thanks to God, I doubt that they would have found the courage to hold out as they did! They declared, *“Let’s focus on what we have going for us, not on what we have going against us,”* and for nearly 400 years now, all across America, that is what people try to do once a year.

Now just think of what that country would be like if they all did that every day of the year! Think of what our nation, our city, our Church and our own lives would be like if we gave thanks to God every day for what is going *for* us and turn our attention away from what may be going *against* us.

Just imagine feeling grateful, thankful, humble and joyful every day - not just once a year - but every day! Not possible, you say? Think again. God would not encourage us hundreds of times through the Bible to live like that if it was impossible. We simply need God to help us re-program how we think. We need to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Life is so much better when your mindset, your orientation, your entire demeanour and attitude is that of thanksgiving for what you have, where you are and who you are, rather than focussing on what you would *like* to have, where you would *like* to be or who you *wish* you were!

If you focus on what you have, you'll always have more than you need. If you focus on what you don't have, you'll never have enough.

Now of course every day won't be perfect. Actually, some of them will be gut-wrenchingly hard. After all, we are broken people living in a broken world. So there will be bad days and sad days. But circumstances can never dictate our attitude, unless we choose to let them. No circumstance in life, no other human being, and not even God, can control what you think or dictate the attitude of your heart. You are the only one who determines your attitude and if you choose every day to focus on what you are grateful for, your life will be transformed over time and any feelings of anger, resentment, selfishness and negativity which may pop up will just fade into oblivion as they are overridden by gratitude.

Now the real challenge for us today, living in twenty-first century Australia, is that grumbling and complaining is almost a way of life. We are a nation of whingers, so we're told. We complain about everything. It seems to be a sport for some. The media feeds this negative spirit of complaint every day. The focus of almost every news bulletin is negative because bad news and complaints boost the ratings. Good news stories annoy a nation of whingers because they immediately have to compare that story with their sorry lot in life and they resent it.

So is there any hope for us? Yes there is and you are part of that hope. It's called the Church of Jesus Christ - in all its counter-cultural, transformational glory. We are the disciples of the Messiah; the Saviour of the world; the Way, the Truth and the Life - abundant life at that; we worship and follow the One Who has promised to renew our minds, change our hearts and give us countless reasons to give thanks. We are the light of the world; the salt of the earth; vessels of the Holy Spirit - channels of the presence of God and the power of heaven! We carry with us the only answer to all the world's problems: Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the answer to every serious question in life. Jesus is the creator of the universe, the author of our faith, the saviour of our souls, the mediator Who has reconciled us to God forever, the mentor and role model for our lives and our ministries, and the source of all wisdom, power, vision and purpose! As we turn our eyes upon Jesus and embrace all that He is and all that He has done and secured for us and given to us freely then developing an attitude of gratitude will not be a discipline, a chore, a burden or a dead religious work ... as we turn our hearts, minds and focus towards Jesus, every day - gratitude, praise and thanksgiving will just overflow from the life of Christ within us.

Then, and only then, Paul's words in Colossians 3 become a promise of who we are becoming, not a call to be something we can't be. The peace of Christ *will* then rule in our hearts, since as members of one body we were called to peace. And we *will* be thankful as the message of Christ dwells among us richly and we teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in our hearts. Then an attitude of gratitude *will* emerge from the Spirit of Christ within us so that whatever we do, whether in word or deed, we *will* do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. It's not easy, but it's more than possible - it's our destiny; it's our calling; it's the promise of God to each one of us.

Brothers and sisters, I have to confess to you that from a human standpoint only, the past eight months for me have been really difficult, stressful, exhausting, disappointing at times and something I would not wish on anybody. As I'm sure many of you have experienced at times during your lives, it is really difficult to maintain an attitude of gratitude in the midst of huge challenges you never expected, never asked for, were not responsible for and would gladly walk away from - if God would let you. The simple truth is this: giving thanks to God in all circumstances and exhibiting an attitude of gratitude every single day is just not possible without the discernment, wisdom and power of the Spirit of God within us.

Some of you may recall my first sermon among you when I encouraged you all to ask the same two questions I ask every day, *"What are You doing, Lord?"* and *"How can I be part of it?"* Simple questions, but very dangerous ones too because very often we don't like what God is doing and even more often, we are not so keen to be part of it when we do know! I confess there have been times when I have asked, *"What are You doing, Lord?"* and when I discerned His answer, I asked, *"So what else are you doing, Lord?!"*

When I entered our worship centre in the early hours of Sunday 2nd April this year, I walked through the flood mud and carefully climbed over the pews all lying on their backs and I stood in the place where the lectern used to be before it floated away. The sight before me was truly overwhelming as my mind went into overdrive thinking of the ways life was about to change for me and for our Church. As I stood there in the eerie silence I found myself instinctively softly asking out loud, *"What are you doing, Lord?"* The answer came to my Spirit faster than I ever expected as I believe I heard God say, *"I am building my Church ... just not the way you expected."* In that moment, I was no longer overwhelmed by the magnitude of what lay before me, I felt that peace which comes only from God and does nothing to change the circumstances, but it most definitely changes our response.

So then I took a deep breath and asked the second question, *"How can I be part of what You are doing, Lord?"* The answer to that question has defined every hour of my life since that day and what a truly amazing time it has been! Ministry doors have been opened; new relationships have been established; miracles have happened; people's hearts have been changed - inside and outside the Church; people's understanding of what's really important to God is changing.

This shocking interruption to our lives and the ministry of Lismore Uniting Church, has been, and will continue to be, a catalyst for God to bring us all into a whole new chapter in our shared journey as God achieves a kingdom purpose far beyond our little community of faith here.

So we need to give thanks to God in the midst of this time of change and transition and turn our eyes and hearts to God and not to the changes themselves, because that's all that matters really. God doesn't care much about our buildings and even less about their contents. He cares only about the Church which Jesus is building and that Church is comprised only of people – God's chosen people. If renovating and updating a worship and ministry space will open up new opportunities for engaging more people in worship, transformational teaching, fellowship, relationships and fruitful ministry in the mission of Christ, then God will be a major part of that building project.

But, if we just want a nice home for our current Church family to enjoy before we all slip into eternity and the doors close behind us, then God is not going to get excited about that and nor will He move mountains or deliver the miracles we need to get that job done. Over the course of history, God knows that buildings and our attitudes towards them, have at times been a hindrance and barrier to the gospel and the growth of God's kingdom. The Church was born and expanded like a bushfire without a single Church building in site.

That doesn't make buildings bad now, it just makes them secondary and less important than bringing people face to face with Jesus. If our buildings and all our resources don't serve that end – bringing people to Christ – then they are useless to God's kingdom. But if we are prepared to continually reassess how the resources God has given us can be used to serve the mission of Christ, then God will partner with us in that project.

That is exactly what this congregation did many months ago when we decided to move forward, not back – and embrace an unknown future rather than a safe, predictable past. I thank God every day for the miracle which has occurred in our Church this year and for the vision that many of you had as far back as day one of the flood clean up. As we were stacking truck loads of destroyed contents on the footpath, some of you were telling me how excited you were about what can happen now. As our city was struggling under the weight of what just hit us, some of you were telling me this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to prepare for the harvest God is going to bring. It was some of you who were telling me that we needed to be brave enough to make choices which may not suit our personal preference or desire, but will open the door for all those whom God desires to lead our way in the days ahead.

You will never know how empowering those comments were to me and how important they were to our whole discernment process over many months. That process culminated in a very firm resolution back in August to move forward and trust God to supply the resources to transform these buildings into 21st century mission and ministry spaces and prepare the way for the generation to come. That decision came at the end of a very long process in which God changed a lot of our hearts and brought us together as His people. But that decision was only the beginning of what will now be a very long building project which will take us deep into next year before an end is in sight.

So the need for us all to trust God, stay united and give thanks in all circumstances, will grow as time goes on and we start to wish it was all over. Being human, there may even be some who wish it didn't begin or wish we had made a different decision. Friends, we need to stand together in this journey. We know that not everyone was excited by the decision we made. For some it was a reluctant acceptance of the inevitable or a respect for the overwhelming majority. For a few it was something they wish they could undo. I understand that, and the grieving process for what used be, actually began the day the flood hit and, for a few people, that grief intensified the day we made the decision to not restore the worship centre to its former condition.

The decision to transform the building God has given us into a ministry space which better serves the mission of Christ in multiple ways in the 21st Century was a prayerful, considered decision – but it still brings a sense of loss and grief. Grief is a natural thing. It's unavoidable. If you care about something or someone, then you will grieve when they have gone. But it's what we choose to do with grief which really defines how we move forward. **Grief can make us better or it can make us bitter – that's entirely up to us.**

We can focus on the wonderful memories and treasured times in the past and the significance of that person or thing or experience in making us who we are today and allow a spirit of thanksgiving to rise up in us as we say farewell and move on to a new day with all those memories firmly in our hearts. Or we can resent the loss, lash out at God and those around us and become bitter as we keep focussing on the loss rather than focussing on the new day which is unfolding.

The organ has gone and it's not coming back. But the melodies it played over multiple generations will remain a precious part of many people's lives. The grand old pulpit has gone, but the life-changing sermons, scripture readings and prayers which went forth from that place have defined and shaped thousands of people's lives over many, many years.

The pews which were the resting place for tens of thousands of saints in services, weddings, funerals, baptisms and celebrations, will soon find homes all across our region, but the memories of people's time in those pews will just grow more precious as the days unfold.

So brothers and sisters, it's time to let go and let God lead us into a new day. It may be time for you to help others let go also. It's time to stand together, united behind the decision our congregation made over three months ago. There is no turning back from that decision now because it triggered many other decisions involving a lot of other people. So the only choice we have now is how we respond – to God, to each other and to the community around us. Will we be grateful, thankful, supportive and forward-looking? Or will our rear view mirror block our vision of the future God has prepared for us and others?

I have to tell you that there are a lot of people outside this Church who are very excited about what is happening here. Past Ministers dating back many decades have contacted me and offered their overwhelming support and prayer for what they believe is a miracle of God's grace and a huge opportunity for mission in the days ahead. Our own Mayor told me last week how he has spoken to so many people across our community who are hearing exciting stories about what Lismore Uniting Church is doing.

The other Ministers and Pastors in town keep asking me how the project is going and they want to know if we can have our grand opening service on a Saturday so they can all come and celebrate with us. Our own Presbytery has re-purposed a huge amount of money to go towards our building project and that's an absolute miracle. Another Presbytery is hopefully going to decide this week if they too will offer us some financial support.

We have so much to be grateful for. God has been so good to us. Doors have been opened which we would never have imagined. Support has come from the most unexpected places. I have also had many conversations with builders and tradespeople about God and the ministry of the Church – conversations I would never have had without this project. We have a long way to go, there is much to be done, but we have come a long way also and we need to give thanks to God for all that He has done and all that He is going to do.

Let me finish with the words of the Apostle Paul, who knew a lot about trusting God and giving thanks in all circumstances. Here are his closing words to the Church in Thessalonica and I believe God's word to our Church today:

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.” (1 Thess. 5:16-28)