

Here we are at Thanksgiving Sunday,
This minor festival of the church where we especially make a point
Of thanking God for the way he has blessed us and provide for us
Through the land.

In our congregation we follow the custom of many congregations
In having a display at the front of the church
Showing the rich variety of the ways in which God blesses us,
And the beauty and attractiveness of the things he gives us,
And, in our prayers, we *give thanks* for all his goodness to us.

But today I want to start with a question:
Why give thanks to God? What's the point?
What difference does it make to how we live?
After all, God will continue to bless us through the land
Even if we never give him a thought,
Even if we never thank him,
And we have this on the authority of Jesus himself,
He says: **[God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.** Matthew 5
So: if we never had a Thanksgiving Sunday,
If we never turned up to church, or turned our minds to God in prayer,
If we never thought about God at all,
In fact if we actively rejected God in our thoughts, words, and deeds,
God would still generously provide for us,
So what's going on in giving thanks to God? What's the point?

Today from the word of God I'll be proclaiming Good News,
Jesus Christ is the one who leads us in thanksgiving,
And as, in Christ, we turn to God in prayer and give thanks,
God gives us peace that goes beyond human understanding,
So that we can *live with contentment*
In the changing circumstances of life,
And so that we can receive the *gift of the resurrection of our bodies.*
Here's how today's reading begins: **Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.**
Paul here is commanding us to rejoice,
Not necessarily because the particular circumstances of our life,
Would naturally lead us to feel joyful,
But because our God has won a great victory for us
In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

One analogy could help here:
Perhaps you've been going through a difficult time in life:
You've had financial or relationship struggles,
Or perhaps you've been going through physical suffering,
That dominates your waking thoughts,
But then you've sat down to watch a sporting contest,
Where your team has snatched victory from the jaws of defeat,
And you've *rejoiced*: maybe given a whoop of joy,

Or got out of your seat, or raised a fist in triumph:
These simple and almost childlike responses are not uncommon,
And, it seems to me, it's part of the charm of going to live events,
To experience the joy of victory with others.

Well, this is how it is in the church:
We do have real troubles that we face:
When St Paul wrote to the Philippians he was in chains, in captivity,
Hardly something to feel joyful about from a worldly point of view.
What's more, in the direct context of St Paul encouraging us to rejoice,
He has been dealing with a sore point of conflict in the church,
Between two prominent women Euodia and Syntyche.
But for St Paul, as for us, the true reason for joy
Is in what the Lord has done for us,
And as we look past the real problems that we face in life,
To the deeper reality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus,
We see that God is in control, that his justice is being done,
And that we can live with hope
Even in the most apparently discouraging circumstances.

This is why St Paul can go on to write: **Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.**
Let's pause here on this word 'gentleness'.
The Greek word that this translates is not that common.
One of the commentaries I read during the week defined it this way:
'Not insisting on every right, or letter of law, or custom; yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, tolerant.'
Let's think about what this means in different life circumstances.
Let's suppose someone says to you after this service,
'Hello, are you visiting here today?'
And you've actually been coming here for the last 30 years or more.
How would you let your gentleness be known to that person?
Well, not by thinking to yourself, 'Who do they think they are?'
Or by giving them short and sharp words
Assuring them that you're a long-term member.
No, you'd let your gentleness be known by saying something like,
'We don't know each other, my name is...,
It's great that we can get to know each other today,
it's good to be a member of Bethlehem with you.'
This sort of response builds up real community,
And leads to joyful life together:
The Lord is near, he's among us,
So that we can be gentle with each other as he is with us.

Because the Lord is near to us, St Paul goes on to write: **Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**
Now of course from a worldly point of view,
We often have much to worry about,
And if St Paul simply wrote 'Don't worry' it might be good advice,
But not *practical* advice in helping us actually deal well with our worry.
But notice how St Paul gives us something to do with our worry,
And that is, to turn it into prayer to God.

In the text he talks about prayers and supplications.
Now we don't use the word 'supplication' much,
But a simple way to think about it is asking for the things you want.
Maybe you want healing for your body,
Maybe you want help in repairing a relationship,
Maybe you want a job, or a car, or a new home,
Maybe you want your son or daughter to come back to church.
We worry about things like these,
And we do well to turn our worry into prayer, and to ask God.

Notice also that St Paul encourages us
To make our prayers and supplications *with thanksgiving*.

Let's pause here and think about what thanksgiving *actually does*
In our lives here and now *with other human beings*.
Let's say you spend the afternoon shopping,
And in the course of the afternoon you are served by many people.
Will these people serve you even if you don't thank them?
Of course, perhaps most of their customers don't thank them.
But if you do, if you look them in the eye and thank them,
Does something different take place?
It does, and we know it, and they know it:
A bridge is built: we show we are not dealing with robots or a slaves,
But with human beings made in the image of God.
Thanksgiving among human beings builds up the human community,
And when Jesus says that we his disciples are the salt and light
Of the world, I think one of the things he is talking about
Is the freedom we have to bring thanksgiving into our world.

Well, just as we can experience the difference
That thanksgiving makes in the human community,
So we can experience the difference that thanksgiving makes with God.
It's true that God will bless us not matter what,
But when God frees us to thank him, we get to know who he really is,
And we experience the joyful community he creates
As our Lord Jesus leads us in thanksgiving.
I'll come back to this directly,
But listen to how St Paul concludes his encouragement to us: **And the peace of God, which surpasses
all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**
As we bring our prayers and supplications with thanksgiving to God,
We may not receive the specific things we ask for,
There is no guarantee that -
And even our Lord as he prayed in the garden for the cup of suffering
To be taken from him, prayed **Yet not my will, but yours be done.**
But what we can be truly confident about
Is that God will give what we in fact most need in relation to worry,
And that is the gift of peace,
And not just any peace,
But the peace of God which goes beyond human understanding,

And that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

It's this sort of peace that gives us true contentment

In the changing circumstances of life.

This is how St Paul puts it from his own experience: **I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.** Philippians 4:11-12

It is Christ Jesus who strengthen us,

So that we can live out our callings faithfully.

More than this, it is our Lord Jesus who frees us to be thankful to God,

And to give us the insight into who God is

That comes through thanksgiving,

As he leads us in thanksgiving.

Remember: **Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and *when he had given thanks, he gave it to them...***

Likewise, **In the same way he took the cup, after the supper, *and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them...***

And what do we receive as Jesus leads us in thanksgiving to the Father?

His body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins.

We experience that the God who made all that there is,

The God who provides richly and generously for us through the land,

The God who in his fatherly goodness feeds the just and the unjust,

We experience that this God brings us close to himself,

And teaches us who he is,

As he draws us into his household of faith,

As he forgives our sins in Christ Jesus,

And as he satisfies the true and deeper hunger and thirst

For righteousness with the Bread of Life,

Christ Jesus himself.

My God always give us his Holy Spirit,

So that we always let our Lord Jesus lead us in thanks to the Father,

So that we live at peace with God and each other,

So that we live with true contentment in life,

And so that we are raised up together in the resurrected life

On the last day. in Jesus' name. Amen.