

## The Blessings of Gratitude

In Stephen Spielberg's film "The Colour Purple" two of the main characters are walking through a beautiful field filled with purple flowers, and one turns to the other and says: "You know I think it frustrates God for someone to walk through a field like this and not notice and not give thanks." Maybe there's something there about how we walk through life, a reminder to stay awake, having our eyes open, noticing and giving thanks.

I am often struck by how St Paul knows how to be grateful, how to be awake to the ways God is present and close to him in his life. You will notice his letters are often full of gratitude. In the letter to the Thessalonians for instance he says:

"We always mention you in our prayers and thank God for you all."  
(1 Thessalonians 1:2-3)

And later on

"How can we thank God enough for you, for all the joy we feel before our God on your account" (1 Thessalonians 3:9)

In the letter to the Philippians he says: "I thank my God for you every time I think of you; and every time I pray for you all, I pray with joy"  
(Philippians 1:3)

In Philemon he says: "I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers" (Philemon 1:4)

His is a life full of thanksgiving and joy and appreciation, even in the midst of hardship. He is to me a reminder to look again at my life with appreciative eyes – perhaps all the more important when it can be tempting to see only the negative - to notice the people who have been and are a real blessing for me, God's providence reaching out to me, a gift he is offering me: To treasure those encounters and to live with my eyes open to the gift of the people who are in my life.

I have a friend of many years whom I value very much. When I first got to know him he would always be telling me about these amazing people he had encountered – people of amazing goodness and generosity, people who endure suffering and hardship with incredible dignity and love, people who had overcome great challenges, people with fascinating lives. And I used to wonder to myself – how does he get to meet all these fascinating people that I never seem to meet. Until I spent more time with him and saw how open and welcoming and interested he was – every encounter an opportunity, a discovery, him totally present. And I realised I did meet them, I walked past them every day – I just didn't stop to spend the time to see them, to get to know them, to really welcome the encounter, to appreciate them. This is our invitation – to live with gratitude the encounters we are given, to notice and to appreciate. When we do we come to realise something. It is captured well in the words of Jacob, in the book of Genesis, when he *wakes from his dream*. 'Truly, God is in this place and I did not know it!' he says. We are told he was *afraid* (that sense of wonder and mystery we feel in the presence of God) and said, 'How awe-inspiring this place is! This is nothing less than a house of God; this is the gate of heaven!' (Genesis 28:10-17)

“Truly God is in this place and I did not know it.” Very often our lives can be like that – they are full of his presence, coming to us in so many ways, but especially through other people. But all too often we are not really aware, we are asleep. When we choose to look again at our lives with the eyes of gratitude, we start to realise how blessed we have been and how God has always been present in very concrete and ordinary ways. We wake up and begin to see the richness in our lives.

It is one of the things I have come to appreciate more and more over time - how much I owe to other people, how my life has been shaped by the people who have supported me, inspired me, taught me, been a witness to me of what is possible, been a companion to me, a presence of Christ to me.

My parents and family, friends, the people I have come to work with and share this journey of life and faith with, some life-long presences, some so-called “chance encounters” that have been very significant, people who have come and gone but left a blessing.

I am not my own creation. I am first of all the Lord’s – my life is given to me by him. As it says in Psalm 118: “Lord, it was your hands that made me and shaped me.” And part of his providential care is the way I am in a real sense also created by others – the way I have been nourished and shaped by the people I have encountered, people who have been a presence of God’s providential care for me in different ways and at different moments along the way, who have helped shape and create who I am today. It is good to stop, to remember and to be grateful.

“How can we thank God enough for you, for all the joy we feel before our God on your account?” (St Paul)

Sometimes I don’t think we believe in the Incarnation enough. Not so much that the Word became flesh and lived among us, but that He continues to take flesh and to come to us through the presence and care of those people he sends to us.

Who are they for you – the people who have blessed you and supported you, the people who have been a presence of Christ’s love for you, who in God’s providence have been there at the right time in the right way for you? It is good to give thanks...

A friend of mine paints watercolours. Once, when there was someone in the parish leaving, she did a series of paintings to represent the various significant moments of his life and displayed them in a row on the wall of the parish centre. It was only then that I noticed something that had always been in all her paintings but that I had missed – a red line which ran through each painting, in this case running through each moment of his life. I asked her what it represented – she said, “It is the line of grace that runs through each life.” That line runs through all our lives, and it seems to me that it is largely made up of people, people who are the presence of grace to us.

Who are they for you – those who form part of the line of grace running through your life? Take time to remember – go through your life. Who is there now in your life you are grateful for, who is a blessing to you? Who has there been? The people who have shaped you and cared for you and inspired you. And the people you have cared for. Have there been people at particular moments, people who seemed to be there at the right time in the right way? Have there been people who have been there for a while, who have come and gone but left a blessing?

I invite you to make this day a day to appreciate. To stop – linger – to look at your life and appreciate – give thanks. To look at who has been in your life for whom you are grateful.

You may perhaps decide you want to write, get in contact, people you want to talk to, to say thank you to.

And you may want to hold them in memory, to thank God for them and pray for them.

And remember too that you are also one of those people – you too can be and are a blessing to others, you too can shape and enrich the lives of those around you. Know the power you have to be a blessing for others.

The film “Love actually” begins in an airport, with people of all ages and backgrounds laughing and crying, greeting each other and welcoming each other home. Accompanying those scenes of joy and affection there is a voice saying: “Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think of the arrivals gate at Heathrow. Those who form general opinion are trying to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don’t see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often, it’s not particularly dignified or newsworthy but it’s always there – fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. ... If you look for it, I have a sneaky feeling that love actually is all around.”

It is part of the line of grace that runs through our lives and invites us to notice it and give thanks for it. It is also an invitation to live life with expectancy, to really live life with openness, expecting God to act, alert to the blessings that come your way, especially to welcome and really see the people God places in your life, conscious each encounter could be a real blessing if you are open, and you give yourself.

To quote again from the Colour Purple: “You know I think it frustrates God for someone to walk through a field like this and not notice and not give thanks.” Look again and see how rich your life has been and give thanks. And know how rich your life can be and give yourself to it!

### **A Prayer of St Benedict**

O Gracious and Holy Father, give us  
Wisdom to perceive thee,  
Diligence to seek thee,  
Patience to wait for thee,  
Eyes to behold thee,  
A heart to meditate on thee,  
And a life to proclaim thee;  
Through the power of the Spirit of  
Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Amen

(David Adam, *The Edge of Glory*)