

Be thankful

Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17

Well, you've made it, more or less, through another Christmas. How did it go? Everything cooked to your liking? Batteries for all the children's toys? Gifts that matched and surpassed your greatest expectations? Or were there culinary disasters; disgruntled grandchildren; and your face is just about recovered from your forced smile as you said, "Oh, how thoughtful", when you opened up a parcel and received something that you'll sneak along to Jenners to exchange in a few days' time?

For many the weeks leading up to Christmas Day are a blur of frenetic activity. There seems to be an endless round of parties and events to attend. There are presents to be bought, menus to be planned, and our homes cleaned with extra care, and maybe decorated with all the Christmas finery and tradition we have.

This Sunday falls between Christmas and New Year, after all of the hectic busy-ness. The attendance on this Sunday is often low, certainly in comparison to services in recent days. On a Sunday like this, I believe we are offered a service to breathe, and if not quite relax for Hogmanay is to come, see this day as a respite between the celebrations. And to be thankful.

In schools today there is a strong policy that encourages the affirmation of children. It sometimes goes too far, and some of us wonder how children, always to be praised and told they will be a great success in anything they choose to do, will cope when what they want to do or be doesn't quite go to plan, but that's not to criticise what is, in reality, something very positive, and therefore when wisely used, good.

In our reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians, it's the same message. Paul wants his readers to talk up the good life, live the dream, live the life. Instead of a long list of negatives, Paul tells us to concentrate on the positives. And he goes further than the gospel of niceness when it comes to gratitude. He calls for gratitude to be a way of living, so that the practice of positive thinking and behaving has a knock-on effect on the people around us. On this Sunday

after Christmas, if any people touched by the Christian message managed to make it back to Church, will they find what the writer of this short letter wants Christian people to be? People who reveal in the way they think and speak and live in a particular kind of way because that is what their inner faith looks like on the outside?

The writer of this letter, in a devastatingly deceptive way, tells us what Christians should be like: people who have taken on board their lives compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience, tolerance, forgiveness. That's quite a shopping list. It's quite a list against which we check our lives. How compassionate am I? How kind am I? How meek and patient and tolerant and forgiving am I?

Put on love – the writer says. How loving am I? For when we put on love, everything holds together in harmony. Then peace will come and order our lives. And be thankful, the writer says. Show it in your thoughts and words and actions. The more thankful you are, the bigger the change will be in your life, for it will change you, and you will behave differently; and what's more, it may very well be that others will behave differently towards you. The more Christ-like you become, the more inclined they may be to be Christ-like towards you, and towards the people around them. "Put on" all those things, and be thankful. And see the difference it will make.

I finish with this story which I told you some time ago, to help us reflect on what might happen when we put on these virtues Colossians tells us about, and become thankful.

Once there was a king who was so nasty and mean that it showed clearly on his face and in his attitudes. So much so that everyone in his kingdom hated him, but more than that they feared him. Oh they respected him, for he was their king, but when he would ride out among the people with his face all contorted in mean and nasty ugliness, people would scatter and run away. If caught off guard they would bow low averting his eyes in silence, the dislike and fear of him showing on their faces. And the king would mumble, mutter or splutter unkind things to them. No one spoke to him not even a 'good day, sire'. After a while the king grew even angrier with his subjects because of how they seemed to hate and fear him. Finally he called his wisest

wizard to him and said, " I am tired of how the people treat me, use your magic to make them nicer people, I command it"

The wizard thought a long time and said the king would have to do exactly what he told him to do, with no questions and to the letter. He asked the king if he was willing to do that. "If you will not, it is hopeless", said the wizard. The king agreed. "Fine he said, whatever you say, I will do. Anything that is necessary to get those rotten people to treat their king the way he deserves." He grumbled a bit more under his breath and settled his face into his ugliest meanest grimace. The wizard went into a high cabinet and took down a box, which he carefully opened. Inside the box was a mask of the king's own face. It was so like the king that the king's mouth fell open when he saw it! Except for one small or not so small difference. The expression on the mask was smiling and friendly - almost radiant, instead of grouchy and angry and nasty. The king hardly notice the difference of the expression "Where did you get such a mask?" he asked. "Never mind the where," said the wizard, "it is a magic mask. Here is what you must do, as you agreed with no questions asked: You must put this mask on and not take it off for 100 days." "What! It isn't my way to grin like that, they will lose. I can't do that..." "Never mind the protest," said the wizard; "you agreed. Put it on." Well the king grumbled but he did put it on. That day as he rode through the kingdom a few appeared to glance up at him in surprise, for never had they seen the king smile before. After a few days a few brave ones smiled a small smile back. And a week later one actually stood and smiled and said, "Good day to you, Sire." This surprised the king and he did not know what to say, but he did not grumble nasty things at the man.

Word began to spread. The king had had a change of heart. People began to stay where they could see him when he rode by; some bowed and then looked up and smiled at him. "Ah," thought the king, "this is how a king should be treated. Perhaps my subjects are becoming nicer people; perhaps they are not as rotten as they were a while ago." This continued. Each day more people spoke to the king, smiled and even waved as he rode by. And the king, well he began to wave back and to offer his own 'good days' and 'how fare thees.' And the people began to tell him how life was for them. As the king heard sad stories of poverty and illness, he

began to order that the people receive more of the bounty of the land; that they have the services of doctors and that disputes were settled fairly. The people came to think highly of that king. They brought him fruits and vegetables, and flowers from their gardens and the king in turn came to love his people who had become so lovable. He would stop by a peasant's home and sit on the stoop chat and taste a cake or such that a good wife had baked.

The king and his people loved one another. And the King began to feel guilty. He cared so much about these people now and he knew he was deceiving them with the mask. They liked him better, he thought, because of the beauty of the mask. "But it is not me and I can no longer deceive them." Although the 100 days were not quite up, he knew he had to remove the mask and be honest with his people and if they would no longer love him, he would have at least have had these past days. So, he went into a large hall, and looked closely into a large mirror at his face. The mask was smiling as it had on the first day he put it on. He regretted having to take it off, but he could no longer fool the people he had come to love. He reached up and pulled at the mask and it peeled off in his hand. When finally he got his courage up to look again at his mean contorted face, he saw a miracle. For in the days he had come to love his people, his face had changed and now it matched the mask in every respect. It was beautiful, and smiling and looked as he felt at that moment. He wept and touched his laughing face. When next he went out among the people his heart was light for he knew he was himself, true and true enough. And that king and all the people of his kingdom lived a long and contented life.

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones...compassion kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another...forgiving each other...Put on love...And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...And be thankful."

Then see what happens next!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen