

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

'And be thankful.'

Bible Sunday, year A October 25th 2020-10-19

Colossians 3.12-17

Matthew 24.30-35

'...whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' (Colossians 3.17).

Whenever I hear those words from the end of our first reading, I remember the time they first struck me. I was in Canada, staying with a friend in her secluded house among the trees on an idyllic island. I'd spent the previous two weeks, I think, at a huge international conference, and I was as exhausted as I had ever been – physically, intellectually and emotionally. I was so pleased to be in a place where I no longer had to meet new people at every juncture, trying to jump gulfs of culture and language, trying to take in everything I was learning. I just wanted to rest and meet *nobody* else except my dear friend who was hosting me. The hammock in her garden by the creek beckoned – it symbolised everything I wanted to do for the next week or so. And then that dear friend told me that we were going to have lunch with some friends of hers from church. I was so, so grumpy about it. I really didn't want to go – but she gave me no choice.

So, off to lunch we went. And I don't remember much about it, except the friends were a family with teenage children, and at the beginning of the meal (which I think we ate outside) one of the daughters was asked to say grace. And the verse from Colossians with which I began was what she said by way of grace: *'Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'*

Maybe it stuck with me because it seemed a strange sort of grace – not a prayer, really, more of an exhortation. Or perhaps, on some level I recognised that it was a message I needed to hear: be thankful in and for everything, even when you're feeling exhausted... I don't know. But when I read or hear this text now, I always remember the circumstances of that lunch party – the tiredness I was feeling, my extreme bad grace at being dragged there (as I felt), the teenage daughter saying those words at the lunch table as words of *good* grace. It all comes flooding back. So, on this Bible Sunday, I want to say that this is one of the little snippets of the Bible that will always live with me. Not that I can claim that they are words that always live *in* me; I'm still often grumpy and unthankful, I frequently take God's gifts and goodness for granted, I don't often 'do everything' in the name of the Lord Jesus. But at least I can't say I haven't heard the message!

I guess there are little snippets of the Bible which live with us all, for one reason or another. And it's good to

take them out and pay them attention every once in a while.

St Paul was really extremely insistent about his message of being thankful. In the relatively short passage from Colossians which we read today he said it no less than three times: '*be thankful...*' (v.15b); '*with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs...*' (v. 16b); and then today's text: '*...whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*' (v.17). Paul taught that giving thanks was essential to the act of interceding and asking God for things: '*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God*' (Philippians 4.6). And he didn't just teach thanksgiving, he modelled it: even when chained up in prison we're told he spent the night singing praises to God (Acts 16.25). Above all, his Epistles are full of thanksgiving. Did you know that only his letter to the Galatians (a letter he wrote when he was *really* annoyed) doesn't begin with thanksgiving? And usually the thanksgiving at the beginning of an epistle is a matter of him thanking God for the people he was writing to, however much stress and strain they sometimes caused him. We may sometimes be tempted to think of Paul as a dour theologian, but there was a very positive side to him: his life of thanksgiving.

So, let's try to take a leaf out of his book: he taught about being thankful because he knew it doesn't

necessarily come naturally to us in every mood we're in. Some circumstances make it a lot harder than others to show gratitude. So, being thankful is what we might call 'a spiritual discipline' – something we have positively to choose and practise. Not like Pollyanna, the little girl of a rather saccharine novel and film which was popular when I was a child – Pollyanna who contorted her experience, and tried to be 'glad' about everything; but rather, like Paul, who knew only too well how hard life could be, and how much one can be disappointed in people: and yet he chose to be thankful to God in the midst of these circumstances. The constant focus of Paul's life was on Christ Jesus, his death and resurrection, the work of the Spirit flowing from him, and the hope of the glory to come through his grace. With this focus, he looked at everything, and always found cause to be thankful.

We can do the same, which is why I think the text I have chosen today – this little Bible snippet which lives with me, always attached to the memory of a Sunday lunch with strangers in Canada - this verse from Colossians, ends with words about doing everything '*in the name of the Lord Jesus*', so that all of our lives may be shot through with thanksgiving '*through him*'.