

Society of Catholic Priests Conference 2010
Sermon for the Evensong at the Shrine of Our Lady of Egmonton

Luke 1: 46-55

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

And so we come together again to meditate on thanksgiving.

One of the characteristics of a catholic expression of Christianity is a Eucharistic focus and piety. We say that so often, but what does it mean? It means that we are to be people the focus of whose life is giving thanks, offering eucharist, to God. It means that a catholic expression of Christianity must be one where the words 'thank you' are never off our lips, where our minds and hearts are forever filled with gratitude.

It was Fredrick Nietzsche, wasn't it, who said that he might be Christian if only Christ's "followers looked more Redeemed". We might equally say that more people might take to a Eucharistically focussed form of Christianity if only we looked more grateful!

If we want to see a model of a grateful life, we might look to Mary. Look again in your service sheets at that great hymn of praise and thanksgiving which Mary sings, the *Magnificat*.

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, [...]
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

What happens is that Mary discovers that she's expecting a baby and she sings this song. In itself that is no great thing. After all, the hymn echoes the Song of Hannah, another mother responding to the arrival of a child. But the differences are instructive.

On the one hand, Hannah (like Mary's cousin Elizabeth) was a married woman, but one who was childless, who had prayed for a child, and whose conceiving was an answer to prayer. Hannah and Elizabeth have a lot to sing about!

Mary, on the other hand, is not someone who ought to be pregnant. For her, the child in her body brings disgrace within her society and her religion. This child is not an answer to intercessory prayer. And yet Mary sings Hannah's song; Mary thanks and praises God for this pregnancy which is disgracing her.

And so we can see that Mary's thankfulness is a gift from God, a grace, and not simply the natural joy which many couples feel when they are expecting a baby. The key is this: that Mary, full of grace, gives thanks in season and out of season. Her gratitude is a fruit of her faith that God loves her, and that, *no matter what*, she is secure in that love.

That is the gratitude that ought to characterise and find a focus in a catholic Christian life. We are called to find our security in the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ, and in the love of God for us which finds expression there. That is why prayer, and in particular prayer centred in the Eucharist, is foundational to Christian life. We need to give time and energy to allow our minds and our hearts to be filled with the *anamnesis* of God's love for us. We need to take time to learn that the most important thing about us is that God loves us. I wonder if any of us really believes that? Think of how it would transform our lives if we really believed that our failings do not get to define us, and

our achievements and gifts do not get to define us. What defines us is that God loves us in Jesus Christ. If our minds and hearts were filled with that truth, if we gave time to fill our minds and our hearts with that truth, then gratitude for that truth would fill our lives, and we would be Eucharistic people. That is true – gratitude *would* fill our lives, for *anamnesis* leads to thanksgiving. What's more, it is precisely when we remember that God loves us, precisely when our hearts are filled with thanksgiving for this love, that we are free to really minister to others.

Think of what happens at other times. What happens to us when we forget that God loves us? What happens is this. When we feel insecure, we hide behind pride; or we try to make it up to ourselves, and disordered desire takes over. This is how sin enters our lives. Too little *anamnesis* means too little thanksgiving and not enough security. And then pride or concupiscence gets a grip. When we forget that God loves us, we cut ourselves off from others in pride, or we curl up in a foetal ball and suck our thumb and minister to our own imagined needs.

But when we spend time with Christ, our crucified and risen Saviour, we give ourselves space to experience his love for us, and our lives can be filled with gratitude and a freedom to love, a freedom to minister.

And so we see that *anamnesis* leads to thanksgiving, and thanksgiving leads to self-oblation.

What a beautiful thing it would be if our lives were truly Eucharistic! Mass-shaped, and shaped by the Mass.

What does all of this look like in the different Church communities we have visited today? More generally, what does it look like in our different parishes and communities? Well, first of all, what does it look like when it goes wrong? Think again about the shape of sin. Sin cuts us off from others – we look over their heads in a sneer, or we curl up in a ball and play games to make ourselves feel better.

When I was first asked to speak today, the organizing group asked me to lead you in a group exercise. Some of you, I imagine, will be glad to know that they changed their minds! In fact, I do have a group exercise for you, but I won't ask you to do it now. It's a gift to you: so you can take it home and do what you want with it. It seems to me, in any case, that it is such a useful exercise for us – a sort of parish audit, or a college audit for that matter, or perhaps an audit of our own lives. The exercise is this: we ask what parts of our life as a community are rooted in a feeling of superiority, and what parts carry with them a slight hint of self-indulgence. They're the bits we might need to change.

And what does it look like when we get things right? Back to our community audit. And we need to ask this time: in what parts of our community life do we forget ourselves; in what parts of our community life are we really centred on God and others? That's the crux of the thing, isn't it? In a Eucharistic life, *anamnesis* leads to gratitude and security, and that leaves us free to be ecstatic – to centre our lives outside of ourselves, to become caught up in service of God and others. So a Eucharistic life will present to the world like this: people will experience us as free, as liberated, from the need to feel superior or to indulge ourselves. And they will experience us as ecstatic people – that is, they will see that the centre of our lives, of our time and energy and enthusiasm is not ourselves, but is outside of ourselves in God and in others. Or to put it more simply, they will experience us as ministers. We don't need to worry about whether we should change those bits – we're already changing them wherever necessary in response to the needs of others.

So much of our lives is spent standing a bit too tall, feeling superior, or curled up in a ball, playing self-indulgent games. And it's hard to minister to someone when you're feeling smug, looking over their head, and harder still when you're in the foetal position. But in a Eucharistic life, *anamnesis* and thanksgiving mean that we are free to stand up straight and look the other person in the eye, and

see them, and serve them. Remember that story of Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee. A woman comes in who is a prostitute, and Simon is horrified that she has entered his house. And what does Jesus do? He says: "Simon, do you see this woman?" Do you see this woman? In a Eucharistic life, we are freed to stand up straight and look the other person in the eye, and see them, and serve them.

Do you know, Orthodox Christians pray *standing up straight* on a Sunday, to show that they share the life of the resurrected Christ. What a profound insight that is! Those who know that God loves them – those whose lives are *anamnetic* and Eucharistic – what do they look like? They stand up straight and really face others. They stand up straight and face reality. They see people *other* than themselves, *different* from themselves, and offer them love. All is ecstatic, self-transcending, all is centred on the other, and so mobile, responsive to the particular and to the moment. What a lovely thought that is! – that only a life which is rooted in the past of the cross, only a life into which the saving voice of the last day speaks its words of love, is able truly to respond to the present.

Joe Kennedy

Principal, College of the Resurrection, Mirfield