

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost. 15 July 2018. Third Sunday reflecting on Stewardship. Giving.

I wonder what Valeepoan Gunan would say to Chanin Vibulrungsung. Valeepoan Gunan is the Thai Navy diver who died during the rescue of the boys and their coach from the cave in Thailand. Chanin Vibulrungsung is the youngest of the boys who were rescued, only 11 years old. I wonder what they would say to each other. I suspect that there may be part of that conversation which would be similar to the conversation towards the end of the movie 'Saving Private Ryan'. Captain Miller, Tom Hank's character, who has led the rescue mission, says to 'Private Ryan', played by Matt Damon, that he should 'earn this', that he should 'make his life count'. He wants him to see the opportunity which he has been given. At the end we see 'Ryan' at 'Miller's' grave being thankful and wondering if he really did live in such a way that he showed his gratitude.

How do we respond when we receive an extraordinary gift? How do we respond to extraordinary generosity? What does that sort of awareness move in us?

It doesn't have to be a single extraordinary gift though. It could be a lifetime of accumulated blessings. How are our lives changed by the opportunities which we have been given, and even by the awareness of being richly, deeply blessed?

Hopefully some of what moves us is humility. To treat everything that comes to us as a right, or as something which is deserved, seems to me to be somewhat shallow. There are deeper and more integrated ways of thinking and being. For me that way of being, in which we do not take blessings for granted, is profoundly connected to what I feel when I sing my favourite Good Friday hymn, and ponder that almost unanswerable mystery "Oh who am I, that for my sake, my Lord should take frail flesh and die."

The same recognition, and call to embrace a grounded, realistic humility, comes when I read the beautiful hymn in Philippians chapter 2. 'Jesus, being in the image of God, emptied himself, became a servant'. Some of the best gifts and blessings we have are then able to be turned into something which becomes a gift for others.

I am not much of a dancer. If dancing is your thing then maybe that is how you would show your joy and thanks and celebration. David did. David danced. In our first reading today we see David ecstatic with joy, celebrating, knowing that he is blessed. (2 Samuel 6). He danced with such abandon that his wife was shocked. I was at a wedding reception last night and while this one was a gentle occasion I have seen some dancing at wedding receptions which has shocked partners! David wasn't just letting his hair down though. He was celebrating. He couldn't help it. He was just so HAPPY and so deeply aware of having been blessed by God.

We celebrate life and gifts and blessings in many ways. Today we celebrate several baptisms. One of the parts of the service reminds us that the desire for celebrating baptism begins with the awareness of God's love and blessings. It is an expression of love which begins in the love of God for us.

Over the last two weeks we have been reflecting on aspects of stewardship. We began with recognising our blessings, counting the ways in which our lives are blessed. Then what is our response? It includes caring for each other, serving and giving in ways which reflect the gifts which we recognise in ourselves. Sometimes we need help from others to recognise our gifts. That is also part of what being here, in community, is about. We don't always see ourselves clearly. The good bits OR the bits that need some polishing! In love, in community, we are able to be more, and to discover more about ourselves, than we are when alone or just looking in the mirror.

We are blessed. Recognising that is the start. Then comes the choice about what we do with those blessings. Part of that blessing is financial. Australia is more stable and financially secure than most countries in our world. As a nation we have more disposable income than we think. But it is also not really about how much we have. In one of our study groups, as we have been looking at stewardship, the comment was made that part of good stewardship, and an essential aspect of discovering happiness too, is to make a distinction between our wants and our needs. When our wants list is long or unrealisable or unrealistic then we will not only be dissatisfied, we may also find it harder to count our blessings.

In the Old Testament there was a grounded, practical and realistic approach to finding humility and balance in recognising the ways in which our lives have been blessed. It began with the awareness that all we have is a gift from God and continued with the suggested response that one tenth of that blessing be offered back in tangible ways. As we saw from criticism which Jesus offered (see Matthew 23:23) just tithing is counter-productive without having our heart and mind and actions and words also in the right place. But the tithe, offering one tenth, was and is the basic standard suggested for responding to being blessed. Any offering above that was then a further sign of thankfulness. We pussyfoot around that as a challenge and often try to dismiss it as if it were not real, or were an unrealistic challenge. I wouldn't ask anyone to consider what I am not prepared to do myself. All my adult life I have taken up that challenge. It is possible. But it is also a personal decision. What you decide to do is up to you and God.

In many places the challenge has been reshaped as an invitation to proportional giving. Rather than thinking just of a particular amount the invitation is that we think of our financial offering as a percentage of our overall income. As we consider our responses in preparation for the Thanksgiving Sunday on July 29 perhaps, for yourself, translating your offering into a percentage will be a helpful way of reflecting on the decision you make.

Why am I saying this? It is not to boost the church bank account. First of all it is about us all learning to be thankful. It is also so that we can DO what we have already discerned that we believe we are called to DO. It is so that we can BE who we have already discerned that we are called to BE. The challenge to generous stewardship of all the ways in which we have been blessed, including financially, is part of our 2020 Vision, which we embraced at the beginning of this year.

When thinking what to give we could start with our own situation alone, not even looking at the budget and the existing and planned expenditure. That is actually the best place to start because we give in response to God, not to meet a budget target.

It can also be useful to continue by reflecting on what the identified needs are to which we are giving. Part of our 2020 Vision was the challenge to achieve a balanced budget. That is an important and responsible thing to do. We need to take that together with the challenge to be financially responsible. We have set goals for ourselves in several areas that will cost money. We recognise that we need to ensure that timely maintenance is done and to ensure that the properties entrusted to us are maintained and developed to support our presence and ongoing mission here. That costs money to do. And time and commitment. We have recognised that we are called to be engaged in community beyond ourselves and we have set targets for Mission Giving. That costs, financially and in other ways of responding. We have recognised that Youth, Children and Families are a priority for us to be able to engage as the church with the people among and around us. That has a cost, financially and in other ways.

All these basic initiatives, along with adequate provision for the assets we continue to use, means that our budget needs to increase by approximately \$50,000 a year. If we reach that level then we could say that the budget is balanced financially and the budget reflects our vision. That is part of the whole picture of who we are, responding to the 2020 Vision of who we believe God is calling us to be as the people of God here and now in this place.

Setting that extra amount as a target might be too low though. If we only give to pay for the things we see then we turn the giving to God into a transaction. The equation really starts with counting our blessings, recognising how deeply we have been blessed, responding with generosity from the heart to the experience of being loved.

What might Valeepoan Gunan have said to Chanin Vibulrungreung?

What message did Captain John Miller give to Private Ryan?

What is God saying to you?

Let love flow through you. Celebrate. Dance if you want to. And let love flow through you, with thanks.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell