

Living Thankful Lives (Part II)

On a recent trip to Flagstaff I pulled into a rest stop and as I entered the restroom there was an elderly man standing there with a cane in his hand. He was struggling to put himself together so he could leave. He asked for my help and I called for his wife who was waiting outside and together we got him out the door. His steps were labored and short. I thought to myself, how is he going to walk the entire distance back to the car? He was exhausted by the experience and collapsed outside. We got him up and had him rest on a nearby rock. I offered to pull up their car so that he would not have to walk all the way back to the car and assisted him to the car. This elderly couple was traveling alone from Prescott to Grand Junction, Colorado. I said a prayer for them as they went their way.

It can easily be said that the entire meaning of living a Christian life is found in living thankfully. Thankfulness was at the heart of Christ's teaching (Matt 11:25, Lk 10:21, Jn 11:41) and has become the foundation of how generations of Christians approach God in worship. A UC Davis psychologist named Robert Emmons demonstrated in his research the benefits of living thankfully. "The evidence that cultivating gratefulness is good for you is overwhelming. Gratitude is a quality that we should aspire to as a part and parcel of personal growth...Specifically, we have shown that gratitude is positively related to such critical outcomes as life satisfaction, vitality, happiness, self-esteem, optimism, hope, empathy, and willingness to provide emotional and tangible support for other people, whereas being ungrateful is related to anxiety, depression, envy, materialism, and loneliness." This is no surprise to Christians, but as Orthodox, our worship has retained the means of realizing and developing thankful lives.

Worship & Thankfulness

In the Orthodox Church there is an amazing connection between scripture and the liturgy. "Faith, grounded in Scripture, determines the content of our worship; worship gives expression to our faith. This principle, once again, is expressed most succinctly in the Latin phrase *lex orandi, lex est credendi*, our rule of worship is nothing other than our rule of belief. Our prayer is shaped by and expresses our theology, just as our theology is illumined and deepened by our prayer (Fr. John Breck, *The Bible & Liturgy*)."

This teaching is important because it serves as a "check point" for how well one connects their beliefs with how one actually lives life. Worship can be seen as a continual lesson in teaching and developing thankfulness in the lives of Christians.

In the liturgy the priest says out loud, "Lord, God Almighty, You alone are holy. You accept a sacrifice of praise from those who call upon You with their whole heart...(Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom)." St. Paul used this expression with how one ought to live and worship God. He says: "Through Him, then, let us be offering up a "sacrifice of praise" continually to God, that is, "the fruit of the lips," giving thanks to His

name [Heb. 13:15].” By teaching that this is done continually, he expressed here a way of life that is not limited to the formal act of worship.

St. John Chrysostom explains. “Of what kind of sacrifice does he speak? The fruit of the lips giving thanks to His name...Let us bring...thanksgiving; and in everything let us imitate the Christ. Let this bud forth from our lips....Let us bear all things thankfully, be it poverty, be it disease, be it anything else whatever; for He alone knows the things expedient for us...Let us utter nothing blasphemous, nothing reckless, nothing rash or insolent, nothing overbold, nothing desperate, but let us speak and do all with reverence and piety.” Clearly he is teaching that this thankfulness requires eyes that can see and ears that can hear in order to be understood.

Such is the case when we listen to the prayer of the priest at the anaphora (lifting-up). This prayer is the act of bringing forth thankfulness. The anaphora prayer is said just before the consecration of the holy gifts in the liturgy. The prayer provides a continual remembrance of all the things that have been done for us by God in order that we may receive salvation.

“It is proper and right to sing to You, bless You, praise You, thank You and worship You in all places of Your dominion.”

“...but keep on being filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and chanting in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to the God and Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:18-20).”
“Our hymns declare the strength and majesty of God. They express gratitude for His benefits and His deeds. Our psalms convey this gratitude also, since the word ‘Alleluia’ is either prefaced or appended to them...These spiritual songs help us express our meaning more plainly for the sake of simple folk. It is more with the mind than with the voice that we sing, offer psalms, and praise God (Blessed Jerome, “Epistle to the Ephesians).”

Regardless of what one may think their purpose in life might be; it is in the act of worshipping God that we realize who we have been created to be. To be fully human is to worship God rationally and spiritually. Not everyone is “musically inclined” but everyone is created to be “mystically inclined.” To bless God is a way of acknowledging His presence. To praise God is to acknowledge His gratefulness in our lives. To thank Him, is to return to God that which He deserves. To worship Him in all places means we do not stop worshipping God after the liturgy is ended; every day and every moment of our lives are under God’s dominion.

“For You are God ineffable, beyond comprehension, invisible, beyond understanding, existing forever and always the same You and Your only begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit.” (I Tim 1:17, Phil 4:7)

As we approach God, we do not start with “Jesus my friend and buddy” but with the Truth about God as the One who is beyond all explanations, all understanding and all words. Yet, this unknowable God has chosen to reveal Himself to us as a community of three persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

"You brought us into being out of nothing. (John 1:3, Heb 11:3)"

This act of creation is an expression of God as love. God creates because it is His nature. Mankind is made out of nothing yet is given everything being created in His Image and Likeness. Christ comes to restore this Image in us and raises up humanity.

"And when we fell, You raised us up again. (Eph 2:6)"

When God created He foreknew that He would have to send His Son in order to reconcile His creation with Himself after we fell. Christ comes and dies on the Cross for our salvation. The ultimate expression of God’s love is the sacrifice of His Son. Our only response is one of thankfulness and gratitude.

"You did not cease doing everything."

The entire history of Israel is nothing other than God’s doing everything possible to prepare the world for the coming of His Son. There are no limits to God’s continual action and desire to save everyone. He is continually seeking our response to His action on the Cross. He is always offering opportunities to grab our attention so that we may experience His deep desire for our love.

"Until You led us to heaven and granted us Your kingdom to come. (Lk 17:21, 8:10, 10:9-11)"

These profound words are often missed during the liturgy! Heaven is not some distant thing coming in the future but has been inaugurated by the appearance of Christ in the flesh. The 8th Day, the Day beyond time has come and is the gift of the Church. Where Christ is, there is His Kingdom. Every time we assemble as the Church we realize ourselves as the Body of Christ and the presence of His Kingdom on earth.

For all these things we thank You and Your only begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit; for all things that we know and do not know, for blessings seen and unseen that have been bestowed upon us.

“Wherefore, since we are receiving an unshakable kingdom, let us be having gratitude by which we may worship God well pleasingly with reverence and piety (Heb. 12:28)”
Ultimately, we are mostly unaware and clueless as to the workings of God in our lives. The prayer says that perhaps most things we consider not as blessings are indeed such and given to us by God for our benefit. This prayer challenges us to think thankfully

about that which we have missed. This includes all the bad stuff we encounter in life. God allows it to take place and our job is to find the hidden blessings that are there. Saint Chrysostom: "This is to be thankful...to express gratitude for all things, even though one insult or weary him. For he who gives thanks to God for what he suffers will not avenge himself on him that has done him wrong, since he that takes revenge expresses no gratitude....They who seek revenge are ungrateful."

"And let the peace of God be presiding in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and keep on becoming thankful (Col. 3:15)."

Your co-worker in Christ,
Fr. Andrew