

**“Give thanks in all circumstances for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”**

I wonder how many congregations in Melbourne are celebrating thanksgiving today? It seems strange and a little uncomfortable celebrating thanksgiving here in Adelaide at the end of such a horrible week for our neighbours in Victoria. Hundreds killed and thousands left homeless after bushfires destroyed their lives. Can you imagine how you would feel if within a few minutes everything you owned was destroyed so violently by fire or ruined by floodwaters as in Qld. Imagine how you would feel if those closest to you had died in such a horrible way. And how are we supposed to give thanks here anyway when there has been no rain for so long and our river is drying up sucking the life out of many of our towns? Even the Torrens is dry! And then we remember the financial crisis has decimated our retirement funds too. Thanksgiving, for what?

Very often our level of thanksgiving depends on our circumstances as we see them. If we are not happy with our circumstances we are not all that thankful. In fact we may even complain against God.

When asked what he had to say about the devastation of the fires Prime Minister Rudd said: “There but for the grace of God go I”. He was thankful it was not him. He saw it as grace from God that such a disaster had not happened to him. He compared his circumstances to those who were suffering and realised he had much to be thankful for. And a chorus of Australians joined in this week, saying how what they were watching on TV had made them appreciate what they had - family, house, car, dog, clothes, food, and life itself.

And what of those who had gone through the fire. People who had lost precious possessions and even more precious loved ones? Well, surprisingly many of them were so thankful too. Thankful to be alive, to be reunited with familiar faces, and thankful to their rescuers. One lady said she was so thankful just to be able to clean her teeth and enjoy a shower. She said “we’re here, we’re together and we’re safe”. A man opened his pockets and said “I only have \$2 left in the world, but hey, I am still here!” he was thankful despite his circumstances. And together many of the victims were overwhelmed by the flood of generosity and support and love flowing from all parts of the country into Victoria, thankful to know strangers care about what has happened to them.

Thankfulness doesn’t have to depend on the circumstances, but sometimes it takes a dramatic change of circumstances in our own or other people’s lives to bring us to be thankful for the smallest of life’s blessings. A new resident at a house for people with mental health issues where we conduct a monthly devotion told me how he had suffered a brain injury and had died three times on the way to hospital – he said “some people would look at me and only think about what I lost, but for me every day is a bonus”. He was thankful despite his circumstances.

**“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:18)**

For Christians, thanksgiving need not depend on the circumstances of life. We don’t look at our own circumstances and only give thanks when things are falling our way, and we don’t only give thanks when we compare our circumstances with those who are worse off. **“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”**. How can we give thanks in all circumstances, even when things are crook? The key is in the last few words “...in Christ Jesus”. **“Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”**. Our circumstances have been changed forever by God’s great gift of his Son Jesus Christ. Because we know Jesus Christ and what he has done for us whatever our circumstances are we have reason to be thankful, more reason than anyone else, even those who have far more of the good things of this life.

When you have been saved from the fires of hell, every day and everything is a bonus, a gracious gift from a gracious God. And that is just what Jesus has done for us, saved us from the ultimate hell, the judgement and separation from God that we are all threatened with because we have all turned away from him. Jesus stepped in at his Father’s request and went through death and hell for us. Why else do we call him our saviour? What else do we really believe he has saved us from?

If Christ has saved and rescued us from death and hell then everything else we enjoy in this life is a bonus – food, water, air to breathe, and loved ones to hold. And we realise with thankful hearts that we are being held by the arms of a loving, caring God, whatever the circumstances.

**“Do not worry about your life”** said Jesus in today’s gospel, **“what you will eat or drink or your body, what you will wear...”** **“Your heavenly Father knows you need them”**. God cares, Jesus says, he cared enough to die for you and he cares about the daily details and the daily needs of your life, he cares about your circumstances. That may be hard for some people to believe that right now. They have gone through hell and are still going through it as they grieve. Maybe there are days for you when you can’t give thanks any more to a Father you don’t see as caring, and whose hand took something precious away from you or seems to be holding back from you. Maybe God’s hand seems closed not open to you at times.

On days like that we turn to and point people to the Father whose Son was taken from him and killed on a cross, the God we know in Jesus the Son, who willingly died and went through hell for us, proclaiming a victory there for all of us who look to him. We turn to the God of Good Friday and above all Easter Day, the God we know loved us to death in Christ Jesus and in whom we hope for resurrection and eternal life. Christmas presents are a distant memory right now and pretty meaningless, but in the face of tragedy and loss we turn our faces toward Lent and Easter, and we see God’s love for us in Christ Jesus who has changed our circumstances forever. In him we are forgiven, in him we are safe for all eternity, in him we are assured of God’s great love whatever happen, in him we see a loving Father at work in daily life too. We see God providing for us through work and each others’ work, government and charities and churches. We become conscious of each breath being a gift, each person special, each day an opportunity. We receive everything with thanks in the light of Jesus.

God does not expect thanks **for** all circumstances but calls for it **in** all circumstances as we recognise he is there with us in everything, the good times and the bad, when life is full and when we are empty. We continue to see his presence and hand in the smallest of gifts.

As Christians we still believe in a loving giving gracious God even if the worst happens.

The Old Testament prophet Habakkuk said **“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stall, yet I will still rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my saviour.”** (Habakkuk 3:17-18). His thanks was not dependent on the circumstances but on knowing his saviour.

Job had his possessions stolen, house burnt down children killed and health taken away but he says **“The Lord gives, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord”**. He had nothing left, except a thankful heart.

Or think of the man who wrote the hymn we sang before. He and his country had been decimated by war for 30 years and he had buried thousands of his friends and community as their pastor. Yet he wrote:

*Now thank we all our God  
with hearts and hands and voices.....  
Who from our mother’s arms  
has blessed us on our way  
with countless gifts of love  
and still is ours today,*

*.....and still is ours today.* The guarantee of that is not the abundance of possessions or good life we see around us, but Christ Jesus our Lord, who is the secret of a thankful life.

**“Give thanks in all circumstances....”** God has taught me something about that from my fellow Australians this week, and not just from Christians. What about you....?