

# Beyond cupboard love

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 4 August 2024

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Pentecost 11B

**Contemporary Reading: *A Grateful Day* by Brother David Stendl-Rast;  
John 6: 24-35**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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*'Not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.'*

Human motivation is a mixed bag, isn't it? And gratitude – or its absence – can be revealing. When I was a small child of three or four, and shortly before her death, my great Aunt Winifred gifted me a dolls' pram. And not just any dolls' pram. A full-scale miniature perambulator with coach springs and rain hoods! For those of you too young to visualise what I'm talking about, think Mary Poppins!

It was the kind of dolls' pram that some children would have dreamt about. And I now realise it was the miniature version of the real pram in which my great Aunt Winifred had pushed me out for a walk every Wednesday afternoon of my infancy to give my mother a break, taking me out to sit beside her on a bench and eat exactly two Clarnico peppermint creams - I can still taste them.

Now don't misunderstand me. I loved (and somewhat feared) my great Aunt Winifred and I definitely loved her Clarnico peppermint creams and the Cadbury chocolate finger biscuit I was given when we visited her for afternoon tea.

There was a definite element of cupboard love about the Ps and Qs my mother warned me to observe around her. But I loved her, nevertheless.

However, I did not love the dolls' pram. I was just not a doll kind of child. I much preferred blocks and puzzles and books and even toy cars that at least moved! When I unwrapped this huge present the disappointment and dismay must have been written all over my face – whatever was I supposed to do with this heavy, cumbersome and to my mind totally useless object? I just stared at it and dumbly refused to say 'thank you' – and was of course told off for being so ungrateful. When I look back now, I am truly sorry that I received her last gift to me so badly. It must have cost her a small fortune – but more importantly it was the sign of her great love for me.

And this was the problem with the crowd's response to Jesus - they missed the sign and received only their fill of loaves and fish. To reference TS Eliot, they had the experience but missed the meaning. They were to some extent grateful for the physical gift – in a context of great hunger bread and fish was wonder-filled – but uncomprehending of the great Love to which the sign pointed. How uncomprehending are we I wonder?

All around us, as David Stendhal Rast points out in today's reading, we are surrounded by the signs of God's great love – the sky, our eyes, the people we meet. But mostly we forget to say thank you, and in forgetting to say 'thank you' close ourselves to the greater blessings that flow from that acknowledgment of the deep love that surrounds us.

Then they said to him, '*What must we do to perform the works of God?*'

Jesus answered them, '*This is the work of God, that you believe in the one whom God has sent.*'

In other words, it's not about what we 'do'. It's about our attitude towards what – or perhaps I should say 'who' is already there. For every single time God opens God's mouth to express Godself in creation – be it in a leaf, a star, a human face or a cockroach – there is the second person of the Trinity, the Logos, the Word, the Christ, whom God has sent. And that Word, is always, always a Word of Love. This is what Jesus wants his disciples to see and all of us to embrace with the kind of gratitude that transforms.

Now often, we become confused when we hear the word 'believe' and assume it has something to do with intellectual assent to a proposition.

However, as the Jesus of John's gospel uses it, it has more to do with trust – with being able to 'lean in' and feel comforted. This kind of belief and trust is closely related to gratitude, not least because gratitude weakens the power of fear and greatly increases the possibility of trust and transformation.

Gloria Kapinsky, in *Where Two Worlds Touch* writes:

*"Gratitude is a choice that becomes a habit.*

*It is a major ingredient in the alchemy of transformation and is closely related to love...*

*Gratitude creates a combustion of energy that powers our living cells.*

*That's why all spiritual traditions teach the importance of gratitude.*

*It certainly isn't because the Beloved needs any reassurance.*

*Rather it's because when we are in the state of gratitude, we're affirming our faith in our own highest good and denying authority to the paralysing, constricting energy of fear."*

'Gratitude creates a combustion of energy that powers our living cells'! Isn't that lovely? What it would be to harness that energy not just for our own good, but for the good of the world!

And of course this is an inexhaustible energy. Gratitude begets gratitude. The more we give away, the more we have and the more of this life-giving, transformative energy there is in the world. It has the possibility of magnification as we heard in the first part of this scripture last week, as the small child's lunch box became food for thousands. For gratitude almost always and inevitably overflows into generosity; and generosity produces abundance; and where there is abundance there is joy without end.

So where shall we begin? How do we move beyond the cupboard love gratitude? The gratitude that occasionally remembers to thank God as a kind of insurance policy against being told off for our ingratitude and in hopes of a special cookie or two?

How do we enter into that fullness of trust that helps us see the world as the extraordinary sign of God's love that it truly is? Listen perhaps to that great vision of the mystic Thomas Merton, when for an instant he saw the sign of God's love everywhere and the possibility of leaning into that sign in such a way that everything could be different.

He wrote,

*"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . . .*

*This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.*

*Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. . . . But this cannot be seen, only believed and 'understood' by a peculiar gift."* Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

'This cannot be seen, only believed and 'understood' by a peculiar gift' – but the key to that gift is gratitude. And gratitude can be practised. And that's what we're going to be doing this month – practising gratitude. And maybe we won't be very good at it. And maybe sometimes it will feel a bit forced. And maybe some days we will look at our day rather as I looked at that dolls' pram, and we won't feel an ounce of gratitude welling up. And we'll feel like we're failing. And none of that will matter – because we are practising.

And if you're wondering how to practise, here's an idea! And if it doesn't work for you that's fine – there's lots of others out there in the universe of Google, or you may just have your own that's worked for you for years. Remember Gloria Kapinsky, *'gratitude is a choice that becomes a habit'*. So, let's choose to practise gratitude.

Here's one possible way. Imagine a star; one of those six pointed stars we were taught to draw as children by drawing a triangle pointing one way, and then halfway drawing a triangle pointing in the opposite direction. Picturing that? Okay. Every morning as you wake up, before you do anything else, picture drawing a triangle pointing up as a picture of the day that lies ahead of you.

Envisage the three points of that triangle as you give thanks for these three things – for one thing you expect to see; for one thing you expect to do; for one person with whom you expect to interact. Mentally trace the lines of the triangle as you give thanks again for those three things – one thing you expect to see; one thing you expect to do and one person with whom you expect to interact. And they do not have to be big – putting your feet down on a surface that is warm or cool or comforting in some way; taking a shower with water that is warm; greeting a friend or work colleague.

And it does not matter if you give thanks for the same three things most days. You are tracing a trinity of gratitude into the beginning of your day.

At the end of the day, just before you go to sleep, trace the other half of your star, the triangle pointing downwards as you reflect on your day. Think again of three points. Give thanks for something that you saw; for something that you heard or read; and for someone you helped or who helped you.

Trace the lines of that completing triangle in your mind's eye – something you saw, something you heard, someone you helped or who helped you. Your star of gratitude for the day is complete – and we will have acknowledged as David wrote that *'it's not just another day. It's the one day that is given to you.'*

And if we all do this, every day, for the next month, just think what a constellation of stars we will have lit; what an overflowing of love and light into our lives and the world!

And as our gratefulness shines out in blessing, so we become ourselves the signs, everywhere magnifying God's love and the possibilities of peace and healing.

Let's light those stars of gratitude.

In the name of Christ, the living Word and light of the world. Amen