

The same thing your mother said to you, “*Say thank you to the nice man for the lolly.*” Thus Paul says for us to be “*filled with the Spirit*” so that we might give thanks “*to God the Father at all times and for everything.*”

So here we sit in church on a Sunday when we’ve baptised another child into God’s family. We’ve launched Isabelle on her life-time journey of redemption and her parents Dannielle and Blake and their support team; indeed all of us have promised to help make that happen.

Here we pause and think about our lives, all the opportunities we’ve been given; all the gifts; and it is as if the Holy Spirit says to us, “*Say thank you to the nice Saviour for the gift of redemption.*”

I guess that’s why we put the offering, the collection of our gifts for God’s work in our community after the scripture readings and after the sermon. Having heard the Word, having considered your life and your relationship to Christ, it’s now your turn to say “thanks.”

I don’t know where life will take you in the coming week. I don’t know what challenges you may face, what pain or heartache may come your way. I don’t know all the ways you might be asked to serve Christ by some act of risk or charity. But I do believe this: No matter where you find yourself in the coming week, it is possible for you as a thankful follower of Jesus, anywhere, anytime, to give and to live “Thanks.”

To the praise of the Name that is timeless and the Love that is boundless. Amen.

*This sermon was preached by Rev Mark J Dunn at
St John’s Uniting Church
Cnr Mt Alexander Road and Buckley Street Essendon Victoria 3040
Home/Work Ph: 9375 1065
Mob: 0409 009 443 Email: mark@dunn.id.au
www.stjohnsessendon.org.au*

Enquiries about the Christian faith are always welcome.



A Message from Mark!

Thanks - Any Time!

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Scripture: Ephesians 5:15-20

Theme The church at Ephesus is urged to give thanks always, in all circumstances. How is such gratitude and thanksgiving possible? An attitude of gratitude, in every circumstance in life, is only possible as an act of faith, arising out of the conviction that God is good and that God works in all of life’s situations, sometimes subtly, sometimes not on our timeline, but always and everywhere to bring us to God’s good purposes.

Prayer *Blessed God, who calls us to worship and to follow you – thanks. For all the scripture that is larger and deeper and more difficult than our ability to understand – thanks. For all the tasks to which you call us that are more risky, more demanding, and more time-consuming than tasks we would have taken up on our own – thanks. For times of illness and times of pain when we experience the limitations of our physical bodies and are reminded of the blessings of times of good health – thanks. For people who don’t always agree with us, or like us, people who challenge our opinions of ourselves, people who demonstrate to us the limits of our ability to love – thanks. For the church, that can be such a pain, the church that so often disappoints us and aggravates us, reminding us thereby of the wonder of your love for the church – thanks. Amen.*

Introduction Paul writes to tell his readers to give thanks to God “*at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (5:20). How could Paul say that to this forlorn little church, hanging on by its fingernails, in peril from the Empire, filled with all sorts of conflicts and dangers? How is it possible, at all times and in every circumstance to give thanks?

Early in his wonderful novel Les Miserables, Victor Hugo describes the downward descent of Jean Valjean. He was once a prominent young man, but now Valjean is a common labourer who is sentenced to five years in jail for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family.

Five years in prison take a toll upon Valjean then five years becomes 19 years of hard labour in the galley ships of France. As Valjean becomes less a man and more a beast, his soul dries up and he becomes a thoughtless creature.

“Jean Valjean entered the galleys sobbing and trembling; he left hardened. He entered in despair; he left sullen.” Finally, he is released but Valjean’s troubles are far from over. Nobody will talk to him or give him work or shelter because of his criminal record. Embittered, exhausted, Valjean comes to the house of an old bishop who greets him courteously and treats the ragged, forlorn beggar as an honoured guest. Valjean, in his depressed, wretched state, is dumbfounded by his host’s graciousness and generosity. He cynically lurks away from the house, stealing two fine silver plates from the bishop’s cupboard, fleeing into the darkness of the night. The next day the police arrive at the bishop’s house with the captured criminal and the silver. Valjean is now in complete despair at the prospect of returning to the hellish prison.

Then a strange scene occurs. Confronted by the thief who returned his warm generosity with his cold treachery, the bishop astonishes the thief when he says to the police, ***“I’m glad to see you. But you must have misunderstood. I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver like the rest and would bring 200 francs. Why didn’t you take them along with your cutlery when you departed?”***

At the bishop’s astounding words, Victor Hugo says that, ***“Jean Valjean opened his eyes and looked at the bishop with an expression no human tongue could describe.”*** The police were thus forced to release their captive based upon the bishop’s testimony. The police leave and the bishop hands Valjean the candlesticks, calling him ***“my friend,”*** embracing Valjean warmly before sending him out with this blessing: ***“Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts . . . and I give it to God.”***

In the very next scene, Hugo describes Valjean’s reaction. He weeps as he considers the horrible depths to which he has sunk. He not only weeps but begins to comprehend the new world that the bishop’s mercy has set before him. Valjean regains a glimpse of his humanity. He has been given an amazing gift; his own true God-given self. Gratitude for the gift sweeps Valjean up into a whole new world as he lives out his redemption through this epic tale.

I think that something very much like that has happened to the church at Ephesus, thought to be the recipient of this letter. We think that this church was made up of lots of people who had recently become Christians.

They were non-Jewish people who had absolutely no claim upon the promises of God to Israel; and yet, by the marvellous embrace of Christ, these folk we know as Gentiles had been brought into the family of God. These outsiders had been invited in. Those who had nothing were given everything. They had been transferred to a whole new world. And to these people Paul said, ***“Give thanks always and everywhere for everything.”***

A fellow had a terrible heart valve defect. He was told that he would surely die without a very risky operation. He sought out a good surgeon and submitted himself to the operation. The operation was successful. A few years later, when he and his colleague were in a bad situation due to the gross negligence of some of their co-workers, requiring them to work many late nights and to expend a great deal of time and energy, it was noticed that one seemed not to be in nearly as much misery as the other.

He was his usual, cheerful self, despite the difficulties he had been put in. When asked “Why?”, he responded, ***“Well, when you have nearly died, and been brought back from the dead, and have your life given back to you, well, you tend to be grateful.”***

Sometimes we forget how we got here – here, in the church, in the great foretaste of the Reign of God, saved and sealed for Christ. We didn’t get here because we were successful at loving Jesus. We didn’t get here as any achievement on our part. We got here as gift of grace. And that’s why we sing. That’s why most of our music here tends toward praise and thanksgiving.

To the world awaiting this message, it sometimes seems that Christians are those who must work hard to do good, to live moral, responsible lives in order to please God, in order to get in good with the Almighty. How little the world knows!

Christians do whatever good we do and live the lives we live in response to the God who has graciously given us so much. We got our lives given back to us. We’re living out our redemption - having been invited to take up residence in a whole new world. That invitation, that forgiveness, that embrace makes thanksgiving possible at all times and places. That has to be why Paul doesn’t merely say, ***“Give thanks at all times and places.”*** He says, ***“Give thanks at all times and places in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”***

When I was a child our local grocer would give me a lolly when I accompanied my mother shopping; what would my mother say?