

For five years starting when I was eleven, I went to an evangelical Bible class every Sunday afternoon. This gave me a wonderful grounding in the Scriptures, which I still draw upon today, but it also left me with some rather odd ideas. For instance, I was told that you could always tell a Christian because their mouth went up at the corners.

This has caused me some problems because as you can plainly see, my mouth at rest turns not up but down!

I think that the underlying idea was that Christians are more hopeful and more joyful than other people. However, we don't get that way just by temperament. Together with my down-turning mouth, I am naturally given to a degree of gloominess, a rather British kind of pragmatic Eeyore-ness. In fact one of my very few acting roles was to play Eeyore the depressed donkey in a high school production of the House at Pooh Corner.

Most of us don't become joyful and hopeful Christians by temperament but by persuasion, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, and by choice.

In today's gospel reading all the lepers had the confidence, the faith in Jesus to head off to the officials to show that they were healed. It was only on the way – after they started to act in faith - that the healing happened. All ten lepers were healed, but only one made the choice to be grateful. Only one made the choice to share his joy and return to thank Jesus.

Thanks and praise are central to our worship. We praise God in our hymns and in our prayers, especially the Eucharistic prayer when “joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven we sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name:

Holy, holy, holy Lord. God of power and might,  
Heaven and earth are full of your glory,  
Hosanna in the highest.”

This is a snippet from the great vision of John that we call Revelation. He saw the heavenly court where all the saints and angels praised and worshipped God using these words so when we pray them, we too are joining in the hymn of praise that rings through eternity.

When we talk of praising in human terms we usually mean that we tell someone they did well. God does not need us to tell him he's doing a good job. It is us who need to praise God. And we aren't praising him for his accomplishments, though we may well mention them. We praise God because God is glorious and because praise is the fundamental energy of the universe.

The Trinity is in constant motion, constantly praising, thanking, loving each person. When we praise we are lifted up into that divine life. When we praise we are taken out of ourselves and focus instead on the glory of God, a glory we can only dimly grasp. When we praise we become part of the positive energy flow of the universe that is creating all things that are of Spirit.

In the Letter to the Philippians, Paul tells us to rejoice in the Lord always (Phil 4:4). Rejoicing in the Lord is the same as praising God. We don't need to just give thanks for the good things in our lives – we get to praise God for who she is and to rejoice in her at all times. Whatever is going on in our own lives, God is always just as glorious, just as beautiful, just as loving. Whatever is going on, there is always an opportunity to praise. In fact, when things are going badly it is even more important but

much harder for us to praise God than when things are going well. Because it reminds us of the eternal realities.

The eternal reality is that God's love never wavers. God's unconditional love is not just for the universe as a whole, for the stars and nebulae, dark matter and solar systems – but for each individual creature. The eternal reality is that all of creation is not about us but about God, and about the glory of God. It is easier to see the glory of God when we look at a rose than in the lives and homes lost in Haiti, but God's glory is undiminished by the destruction wreaked by the storm. We may not thank and praise God for the devastation, but we praise God that she is greater than storms, that his love and glory never waivers and that the Holy Spirit is there in the mud and the pain and the anguish.

We may not have much to rejoice in when we look at our lives, but we can always choose to rejoice in the Lord, and as we do so, our perception changes.

Psychologists found that if you ask a child to draw Santa Claus during the summer they're likely to draw a much smaller picture than if you ask for Santa Claus in December when they're excited about Christmas. What we focus on becomes bigger in our minds.

When we focus on what we lack or what we fear it becomes bigger. When we focus on ourselves, we loom large in our own minds. When we choose to focus on the love and glory of God, then we begin to see God all around us. As we praise God, our God moments become more frequent and as we share those glimpses of God's hand with others we help to open their eyes to the wonder and beauty of God, and it becomes a snowball of praise and thanksgiving.

That is what I hope for us. That we continue to become a people built on the praise of God and that as we do so, as we become more and more aware of God's glory, so we will see God's providence and steadfastness all around us. This is the great antidote to fear. This is the only way to stay at peace in the times of difficulty as we see the people and the places and the creatures that are beloved to us suffering. We do not praise God FOR the suffering but IN the suffering.

God never wills suffering, but God is always present in suffering. So we use our dual vision. We see both the suffering and the great love and glory of God. And as we chose to praise God, we see the small mercies, the little miracles that happen even in disaster. And for those we give thanks.

The healing of the lepers didn't depend upon their choosing to give thanks. "Jesus said, 'Your faith has made you well.'" But in giving thanks, the one man had a different experience of Jesus the Christ. His spiritual eyes were opened. It may seem as though we're praising in the dark someone who we're not even sure exists but as we praise so our eyes are opened and we experience God in new and amazing ways.

I know that many of you have a practice of prayer.

We often think about prayer as asking God for help and healing. But another thing I learned in those Bible classes in my teenage years was always to include praise and thanks to God in my prayers. In fact, that's where prayer starts. I was encouraged to start every prayer time with praise and was taught the acronym ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Supplication, Thanksgiving as a way to structure prayer.

When we turn to God let our first impulse always be one of praise. You will notice that many of our liturgical prayers start by making a statement about God, “Almighty God to whom all hearts are open and no desires hid...” This is praise, certainly a rather restrained praise, but nonetheless it is praise of who God is. Our service opens with hymns of praise.

So let us choose to practice not only an attitude of gratitude but also a life of praise. And who knows, maybe miracles will happen and the corners of our mouths will start to turn upwards!