
The Mustard Seed



Armadale Uniting Church

Edition 25 – Advent 2017

Greetings from Fiona.

It is lovely when someone says `thank you`, isn't it?
When someone takes the time to acknowledge what we have done or tried to do.
It feels good.

How important to learn how to **accept** thanks and how important to **give** thanks.

When we stop to consider all we have,
we begin to realise how much we have to be grateful for...

What is on your list?

As Christians, if we stop and think, even for a moment, of what God has done for us in and through Jesus Christ we cannot help but respond with wonder and gratitude.

What a gift! What a wonderful gift!

How important to give thanks to God for all His goodness to us in Jesus Christ –
and not just for us, but for all people and for all creation.

As we enter into the Advent season and as Christmas approaches, take time to consider God's goodness to
you in your life.

This Babe is born for *you*...hope and peace and joy – for *you*...

And if life is hard just now, may you be graced to remember and give thanks that God,
in this vulnerable Child, Who is the Light of the world,
draws near to you in whatever your darkness is.

Here are the words from a new song we have been learning to sing at Christmas...

At this time of giving gladly now we bring

Gifts of goodness and mercy from a heavenly King.

Earth could not contain the treasures heaven holds for you:
Perfect joy and lasting pleasures love so strong and true.

At this time of giving gladly now we bring

Gifts of goodness and mercy from a heavenly King.

May his tender love surround you at this Christmastime.
May you see his smiling face that in the darkness shines.

At this time of giving gladly now we bring

Gifts of goodness and mercy from a heavenly King.

But the many gifts he gives are all poured out from one.
Come receive the greatest gift - the gift of God's own Son.

At this time of giving gladly now we bring

Gifts of goodness and mercy from a heavenly King.

(Graham Kendrick - Copyright © 1988 Make Way Music)

This Christmas time, may we give thanks for the gift of Jesus Christ.

And in gratitude, may we learn better how to give.

Peace and joy, courage and hope to you and yours.

Fiona

From the editors...

Our theme for this issue is “Gratitude”, which is particularly appropriate in the season of Advent. We’re pleased to have some interesting items on this topic.

Fiona’s item is on page 1, and Karel invites us to think about genuine gratitude. Bill reflects in prose and verse on Learning to be Thankful. Pat has provided us with a poem acknowledging the work of the bus drivers who assist many of us, and Rob is grateful for being able to travel.

We’re also pleased to include an article by April regarding “Spiritual Direction”, as well as some other news and items that will hopefully be of interest.

— Bill Rush and Graeme Harris

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A Grace before Christmas Dinner

Jesus, friend of all humanity, we gather round this table
to share this food on Christmas

We give thanks for it

with a sense of well-being for life and health and for each other.

As your grace has blessed us in the past, be with us now,
and help us face the future conscious of your Loving Presence.

Amen

Margaret Black

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:18

Gratitude is attitude, not platitude

Karel Reus



I wonder if it's just because my advanced age is colouring the way I see things, or whether I am really witness to the death of manners and civility. Can it be that our rag-bag of polite conventions has become frayed and torn and is losing its contents?

A story: a few years ago I attended a family Christmas celebration where, early in the morning, the kids were let loose on a mountain of gifts. In what I could only think of as an orgy of conspicuous consumption, these little folk, whose shoulders would some day lift the burdens of our world, became buried in a mountain of coloured paper as gifts were unwrapped, greeted with a smile or (yes) a scowl and cast aside as yet another offering in this savage ritual was subjected to the same fate. I was so offended that, for a while, I had to leave the room. When I got back the parents had imposed some rough order, and I felt that I could ask which presents came from whom. It soon became clear that, with few exceptions, the sources of this Yuletide largess were not known, and the very question was pretty much considered as irrelevant.

Now here is where I really get to do my grumpy-old-man thing, as I reflect on "the good old days" when gifts were acknowledged with gratitude, and gratitude was expressed, normally, in the form of a written note and often sent by mail. Remember handwriting? Remember letters (real letters) in the mail, when even the envelope was savoured while we tried to work out where it came from? And do you remember the days when we understood, in part at least, that the whole present-giving thing went back to Eden and the three wise men and the gift of God to Mary - and to us?

Of course it could be said that nothing much is lost by the decline of what surely are superficial customs. Are we not best rid of the social practices that encase the act of gratitude with a host of platitudes? Well, maybe not. Of course the thank-you note was mostly duty, and the writing and sending were often the result of Mum's insistence. Manners certainly can be superficial. Thank-you notes were without doubt laden with platitudes and polite nonsense. Nevertheless they instilled at least some habits of acknowledgement and recognition which helped establish an understanding that relationships are important, and that we have to work on them.

But gratitude is also attitude. It is more than formalised and barely sincere social behaviour. Gratitude is, at its necessary best, a recognition that something good has come to you which is more than you deserve. Gratitude is immersing oneself in wonder - wonder at the glorious created realm, wonder at the gift of love, wonder at forgiveness, and so on. It is not too hard to put together a list of things we could be grateful for.

Some things mentioned by the Congregation included nature/creation in all its marvellous manifestations, a spectacular sunrise or sunset or a fierce storm, or walking a dog along a deserted beach.

Other things were modern medicine (and modern dentistry), flowers and the endless variety of trees, the gift of water and “my Sunday School teachers”. We’re also grateful for food and shelter, family and friends and for freedom to worship, as well as for Beethoven’s 4th piano concerto. Another response was to express gratitude “for anyone who has ever prayed for me” and for those who make the city work – transport drivers, police, rubbish collectors, road menders.

More generally, the wonder of sound, pattern and shape and the changing seasons were identified.

And one response was, “First thing in the morning, thanking God for bringing me through the night and affording me another day with all the possibilities that can offer!”

But.....

But there are things that we could consider for our list that are not so obvious. Could we, for instance, be grateful for pain? Could we be grateful for old age? Could we be grateful for a church in decline? And what about death and disease? And under what circumstances is it appropriate to have a grateful response to the end of a relationship? It's so much harder to say thank-you for the darker things in life and, frankly, most of us will find it's beyond us. Yet, it's worth a try. That's when prayer really works best; when we enter into a deep conversation with God and when we share with the giver-of-all our heartfelt gratitude that we are privileged to share in the miracle of life, warts and all.

Graeme and Bill are always pleased to receive contributions from all members of the congregation for *The Mustard Seed*. These might be relevant photos, letters to the editors on an aspect of Christian or church life, your favourite hymns, concerns, travels, reflections, memories, book and movie suggestions and reviews, your life story, etc. In short, whatever you think might be of interest to others in the congregation. We would welcome anything from 50 to 500 words.

It is only with gratitude that life becomes rich.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Spiritual Direction

April Blackwell



A few months ago, Bill asked me to write a few words about Spiritual Direction for *The Mustard Seed*. These notes are adapted from a “Hand-out” given on a recent retreat to retreatants.

What is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual Direction (SD) is just like talking with a soul friend—except that the Spiritual Director is mostly *listening*—with “the ear of the heart”. The Spiritual Director is like a guide who accompanies another person on their spiritual journey. Accredited guides usually see pilgrims monthly. They have undergone formation and ongoing professional development in the art of listening and spiritual discernment. They also have training in appropriate theological and psychological disciplines and issues to better equip them for this ministry. They can then refer people on to the appropriate counsellor/psychologist if needed.

What is the direction given?

The Spiritual Director or guide does not tell the “pilgrim” what they should or should not do, believe or not believe. They sit with the pilgrim to assist them in turning their attention to where God’s spirit dwells and give guidance for their ongoing journey. Inward to counter the wider culture’s preoccupation with external appearance and achievements, and to bring one’s attention down from the head to the heart/soul.

Why engage in Spiritual Direction?

“The gift of SD for me is to be deeply listened to without judgement as I talk about what is truly on my heart, drawing me closer to myself and open to God” (Female pilgrim)

“My guide helps me to notice God’s movements within, beneath all other noises and distractions going on in my head”. Male pilgrim

Other things to note:

What is shared in a SD conversation remains confidential;

You will not be judged or assessed by your guide for how spiritual or unspiritual, orthodox or unusual you or your journey seems to be;

The guide is there primarily for the pilgrim, not to share their life experiences;

You are not expected to bring anything to a session. You merely need to turn up, and be open to whatever might arise in the session. If nothing arises, or if you cannot or do not wish to answer your guide’s question you can simply say “pass”.

If you are interested in Spiritual Direction there are several places where you may make enquiries on line. Here are a few that spring to mind.

Campion Retreat Centre (Kew) 98548110)

Heart of Life Spirituality Centre (Boxhill) www.heartoflife.melbourne

The Living Well Centre Inc (Malvern) www.livingwellcentre.org

Wellspring Centre inc (Ashburton) 98860277 www.wellspringcentre.org.au

Advent/Christmas/January services

Christ the King, Sunday 26 November 2017, 9.30 am.

Advent Sunday, 3 December 2017, 9.30 am: Holy Communion.

Services are then at 9.30 each Sunday until New Year, with dates to note as follows —

Christmas Eve, Sunday 24 December: There will be a 9.30 am service as usual, to mark the 4th Sunday in Advent. Then at 7 pm, **Carols for Christmas Eve**, followed by refreshments (suitable for children).

Christmas Day, Monday 25 December: 9.30 am at Armadale, with Holy Communion.

New Year's Eve, Sunday 31 December: 9.30 am at Armadale.

We will be combining with the other Uniting Churches in Stonnington for the remaining services during January. Details are being finalised, so please see the website for details.

LEARNING TO BE THANKFUL

One of the things I have learnt – a bit late in life – is the value of really looking at what is around me. It's so easy to be busy doing and thinking that I don't always properly look at what is at hand. From a window I sometimes notice the large oak and pepper tree in the next property but I've only lately noticed what surrounds them - a purple lasiandra and a very elegant fern. Beyond is a golden leafed tree I haven't as yet identified. The different colours make beautiful contrasts and patterns which for years, I am sorry to say, I didn't really appreciate. The same goes for the moon which I can see from my bed on a cloudless night – but generally ignore while I think about other things before I drop off to sleep. The moon is truly a wondrous object and after paying it attention, I wrote this poem:

THE MOON TONIGHT

Tonight the moon's a comma
part of an interminable sentence
too long to grasp

except it might be poetry
set among stanzas of stars
bright nebulae

that rise, fall, rise again,
the round firmament writing
on pages of water

an epic of reverence

So much of our world deserves better contemplation. Too often, music should be more than background while I multi-task and multi-think. I hope I am learning (though some days better than others) to listen more carefully to other people. Honestly, it's too easy for my mind to race ahead thinking about what I want to say next - and before I have fully taken on board what the other person wants me to understand.

I reckon the more I pay attention, the more life offers, and the more thankful I will be.

Bill R

To be grateful is to recognise the love of God in everything he has given us – and he has given us everything.

Thomas Merton

Around Armadale.....

Mental Health Week — On 11 October, Uniting Prahran and AUC celebrated Mental Health Week with an evening of music and comedy. We heard from Hugh on his guitar, Ruth described her art project, Dale accompanied himself of the guitar and Angela gave a stand-up comedy piece. Everyone who attended agreed that the event was a great success! And that the refreshments - provided by AUC - were great!

(At right, Fiona and Ruth, discussing Ruth's art project).



(Above) All Saints' Day



All Saints' Day—The Church is open each Wednesday morning at 10 am for quiet contemplation, but on 1 November Fiona led us in a short service to make All Saints' Day. We remembered those who have walked before us, but also those still walking with us.

Men's Breakfasts — these have continued regularly each month. Here's a photo from a recent one. (right).



Ode to the Drivers

An ode to the drivers on our bus
They really seem to care for us
They do their work and never fuss
You never hear them curse or cuss.

The kind things they do are too numerous to mention
And to overpraise them is not my intention
But they do give each person special attention.

Even when we're running late
They'll stop the bus and then they wait
Till they see us coming out our gate.
These things we do appreciate.

On Fridays they take us to the market
They drive the bus and then they park it.
Then they unload our trolley.
They always seem so bright and jolly.

They load us on the bus at one
After all our shopping's done
Some of our jeeps they weigh a ton!
Then we're on our homeward run.

They won't leave until they've found us.
They're great people to be around us
The good things they do really astound us.

*These verses are from a longer poem by **Pat Tolson**. They express her gratitude to the Council drivers who take her, and others, to and from the Prahran Market each week to shop.*

Directory/Next of kin/contact details

The Directory has been updated was distributed earlier in the year. Please note that it may only be used for matters relating to the Church. If your details need to be changed, please let Fiona know. Also, please consider giving Fiona contact details of your next of kin/contact, so that they're available if a situation arises where contact needs to be made with someone on your behalf (this information is not included in the Directory).

Hidden Christmas

Timothy Keller 2016 (Hodder and Stoughton UK)

Timothy Keller is minister at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City. His latest book “Hidden Christmas” looks behind the increasingly secular celebrations of the Christmas season to the amazing reality of the Incarnation of God in a stable. Here are some excerpts:

The claim in 1 John 1:1 that ‘our hands have touched him’ never ceases to amaze. How could the infinite become that finite, the extraordinary become that ordinary? Yet that is the heart of the Christmas message – unimaginable greatness was packed into a manger. The world can’t comprehend it. It wants a spectacle. It is the greatest irony that Christmas is the one Christian holiday the world seems to embrace, yet its message is the most incomprehensible.

* * * * *

Matthew does not begin his story of Jesus’ birth by saying ‘once upon a time’. That is the way fairy tales, legends and *Star Wars* begin. ‘Once upon a time’ signals that this probably didn’t happen, or we don’t know what happened but it is a beautiful story that teaches us so much. This is not the kind of account Matthew is giving us. He says ‘This is the genealogy of Jesus Christ’. He is grounding what Jesus is and does, in history. Jesus is not a metaphor. He is real.

* * * * *

It was centuries, millennia, before the angel came to Mary and told her about the child she was to bear. The promise was a long time in coming! In the 400 years before Christ was born no prophets were sent to the people, let alone a messiah. It looked like God had forgotten. But then he came. You cannot judge God by your calendar. He may seem to be working very slowly, even forgetting his promises, but when his promises come true (and they will come true) they always burst the banks of what you imagined.

* * * * *

Look at Mary herself. This girl, no more than fifteen, near the bottom of the social ladder, knew that if she surrendered to God she would go even lower. Yet she did so willingly and went through the agony of watching her son tortured and die young. Think of the darkness she embraced when she said ‘I am the Lord’s servant’. Yet look! Today most people in the world know who she is. Because she humbled herself and became a servant, she became one of the great people in history.

* * * * *

Jesus has come from the eternal, supernatural world that we sense is there, that our hearts know is there, even if our heads say no. At Christmas, he punched a hole between the ideal and the real, the eternal and the temporal, and came into our world. In the old King James version, this chapter is full of “begats” – so and so begat so and so ... Boring? No. The grace of God is so pervasive that even the ‘begats’ of the Bible are dripping with God’s mercy.

Travel—and gratitude

Rob Ahin



It's not difficult to find things to be grateful for, when we are on holidays..... The very fact that we are in a position physically and financially to be “on the road again” is a blessing in itself. Our first destination on our recent trip started in South Africa, spending 4 days in Kruger National Park which is about the size of Northern Ireland and the largest game park in the country.

I have long held a fascination for wild animals in their own habitat. I often see human behaviour expressed in animal behaviour and it reminds me that, while we like to think of ourselves as special, we are just a more sophisticated version of other creatures. To be able to be out there in the wild as an observer is a great privilege, and one that I don't take lightly. To see the sun rise over the African veldt as a fiery red ball reminded me just how beautiful nature is and how fragile we humans are in it.



We saw many animals in Kruger, from huge bull elephants to little ground squirrels and a myriad of colourful birds, from the tiny red billed quelea, who fly in swarms like a cloud to the big white hooded vultures that clean up the carrion left behind by the predators. There is something quite primal about watching the predators - lions, leopards and cheetahs stalking their prey, The ruthless efficiency with which they move makes my heart quicken, and I find myself drawn irresistibly to watch them as they zoom in on their prey. We weren't “lucky enough” to see a “kill”, but I live in hope.

To watch herds or family groups of animals as they go about their business is fascinating. In particular, we watched a group of about 30 elephants around a waterhole. There were the mothers looking after their babies on the edge, squirting muddy water over them to cool them and standing protectively over them. In the middle of the waterhole and on the bank there were young juvenile “teenagers” engaging in rough play and chasing each other or frolicking in the water. Further up the bank groups of “oldies”

standing around, “talking to each other”. I could see so much human behaviour expressed in the way they conducted their daily lives. I felt truly blessed to have been able to witness this.

I could go on but it would become repetitious. I will sum it all up in a phrase I have modified from one I have seen and agree with – Be grateful for being allowed to see the world. Many are denied that privilege.....



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Organist: Rowan Kidd

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Regular service times (except January): 9.30 am each Sunday.

Children’s program: 1st Sunday of the month, during term time.

During January, and occasionally at other times, we hold combined services with the other Stonnington region Churches, instead of meeting at Armadale.