



Thanksgiving, Year C – October 10, 2010
Philippians 4.4-9

A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker

If you know A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, you will also know Eeyore, the nay-saying, melancholy donkey who is as depressing as he is depressed.

I have a friend who reminds me of Eeyore. He is an entirely likeable, bright, astute priest, who sees what there is to be seen. The only trouble is, what he sees is invariably negative. "Gosh," I will say, "isn't it gloriously *warm* out here?", and he will say, "It's cloudy." Or I'll say, "That sure was a good-sized crowd the other night", and he will snarl back, "You'd at least think the Wardens would come". Now, it is undeniably true that it was cloudy, and the Wardens were not present. But, you know, it *was* gloriously warm, and there *was* a good crowd (in spite of the Wardens).

My friend is only an extreme example of a sickness that afflicts us all. For the honest truth is, that often enough, when presented with a situation characterised by both positive and negative elements, we see the negative.

This is true in nearly every aspect of our lives.

It is true, for example, of our own self image. We are far more inclined to believe the bad things people say about us than the compliments they pay us. Compliments we dismiss. "Oh no, not really," we say. But criticise us, and we take to our beds! One negative comment in an otherwise excellent performance review, and we are completely deflated. It is as if we cannot even hear all the positive comments. And we end up by not liking ourselves very well.

And if we are thus about ourselves, we are also negative when it comes to the people around us. Oh not all the time, of course: there may even be a few people for whom we have unqualified admiration, and for whom we wish unqualified good. But there is also a dark side to us, the side of us that can only feel secure in itself if it is able to identify the weaknesses in the people we admire. Cutting people down to size (and it is inevitably *our* size, not theirs) makes them manageable. What is it about us that is more aware of a person's bad taste in argyle socks, than of his or her tender compassion?

And if we are thus about ourselves and about our neighbours, we are also negative about other aspects of our life. It does seem to me that somewhere, perhaps from as early as childhood, we have learned to relate to our environment adversarially. That is, we learned to see and to name what was *wrong* with things, rather than to praise what was *good* in them. When did a spelling test ever come back with 16 correct? Never. It always came back (in red ink) with 4 wrong! We have learned our lesson very well. I do not think, for example, that I was too far advanced in our educational system before I figured out that the best way to prove that I understood what Scholar Z was trying to say, was to poke holes in his argument. Commerce, and politics are just the same. Do you remember how not so long ago advertisers were honour-bound to sell a product on the basis of its own merits, and without denigrating (or for that matter, naming) the competition? You bought Cola A because it was the real thing, not because Cola B stunk. Not any more. We have practically institutionalised negativity.

So, poor old Father Eeyore may be extreme in his nay-saying. But he is not alone.

As Christians, however, we are called to a higher way. We are called to the way of gratitude. Of thanksgiving. This is not to say that we are to turn a blind eye to what is defective, or that we are to settle for less than that excellence which is attainable. But it is to say that there is something fundamentally perverse in preoccupying ourselves with defect. When God saw his creation, all incomplete day by day, still at the end of each day, he could look at what was yet unfinished and say, "And it was good."

To cultivate such a change in attitude would require of us great discipline and perhaps a lifetime of unlearning and relearning. To this end, St. Paul provides a tonic. And we heard it this morning in his letter to the Philippians, in a passage which might otherwise simply wash over us were we not so aware of adversarial, complaining spirits: "Finally, beloved," he says, "whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, *think about these things.*" Focus on what is thank-worthy.

There is no need for us to mope about like Eeyore. We do not have to treat life as our adversary. We do not have to be so infected by our own criticising and judging and complaining that we succumb to this depressive sickness. It *is* possible to focus on the good things. And Paul is suggesting that we can actually *teach* ourselves to do so. Whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent or worthy of praise — we can teach ourselves to think about these things.

And today, Thanksgiving Day, is a great day to start.