

Once upon a time, long, long ago, when Ireland was a wild and savage land - long before Patrick came to convert them, in the days of heros and magic, there was a king called **Finegan the Fair**. Accodring to his official title, He was King-of-All-He-Surveyed, and a lot more besides, and he was also the Greatest-Wizard-in-all-the-Realms, and a lot more besides. He was a youthful Merlin, an ancient Luke Skywalker, a savage celebrity. Anyway, there was this town in his kingdom that was being besieged by an armada of trolls, an army of flying dragons, and several infantry divisions of ogres. The town was in deep trouble. It's food supply was almost used up, its water was low, it warriors were exhausted, and morale had just about reached rock bottom. King Finegan heard about all of this and was rather upset. So he took he horse, Silver – really that's the name of the horse in this story - and his girlfriend, Deirdre the Dark, and rode to the town one night. They slipped though the enemy lines and informed the townsfolk that there was nothing more to worry about because Finegan the Fair was in charge. He cast a few spells [*white magic, of course, because he was a good wizard*] sprinkled around a few potions and muttered a few incantations. Poof! The trolls, the dragons and the ogres disappeared; the marketplace filled up with food, the water in the reservoir lapped against the high edge, and then the townsfolk sang and danced and celebrated.

"Sure now, aren't you forgetting something?" Said Finegan the Fair, leaning forward expectantly on the great white horse, Silver. And people started scurrying here and there doing important errands. "I've never seen it to fail," he muttered to Deirdre the dark, as they rode off into the gathering mists, "You drive away the demons and evils spirits and nobody even bothers to say `thank you.' It just goes to show...even kings and wizards get no respect these days."

Finegan the Fair is a comic character in a silly story. But ingratitude is foolish and silly, too. The people who are too busy, too proud, too arrogant, or too thoughtless to say "thanks" are foolish, ridiculous, comic people. Good is done to them and they accept the good not as a pure gift but as something to which they have an absolute right. It's only when something is owed to you that you are in the position not to say "thanks." If someone returns the money they have owed you for 6 months, a show of gratitude is not required. But if someone just gives you money...

The nine lepers who didn't return to give gratitude to Jesus acted as though the cure was theirs as a matter of right, as something owed them. Oh, we might excuse them with the argument that they were so thrilled, or so surprised, so happy or so eager to tell their families about the gift of health that they forgot gratitude. But to forget something so important is to deny that the act was a gift, to pretend that you had a right to it.

Parents are always insistent that little children learn to say "thanks"; parents are humiliated when the kids forget to say it. Yet those same parents forget to thank one another. In fact, in marriage counseling you can observe that years can go by in a marriage in which gratitude was as about as functional in that relationship as a bicycle to a fish.

If we are really honest about it, we have to admit that we sort of resist saying "thank you" because we are proud and don't want to be dependent on anyone else, to be vulnerable. Sincere gratitude is an act of both dependence and vulnerability. Gratitude to God for the gifts he has given us and gratitude to our fellow humans goes hand-in-hand. The person who remembers to say "thank you" to God will also remember to thank the people around him; the one who has no time for gratitude to other humans has no time to thank God.

For too many of us "thank you" has become a meaningless exclamation that ends an encounter or an occasional prayer when something wonderful happens, or something terrible is averted. We are very good at praying to God **for** things we want; we are not so good at being grateful **afterwards**, and **we are definitely** not very good at expressing general gratitude for our life, the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, the family who loves us, and the friends who stand by us.

Actually, God has given us so much that we could spend all our time in prayers of gratitude. The most common excuse for ingratitude, with God or other folk, is thoughtlessness. We don't usually do it on purpose, but it is the result of distraction, inattention, the constant demands and monotony of the routines in our lives. The leper's today may have been in exile for a long time and probably had a lot of things to "catch up on" and they intended to thank Jesus when they got around to it. Only they never got around to it. The townsfolk probably had every intention of thanking Finegan the Fair, but after all, there was so much work to do after a siege they never got around to it. Gratitude to God and to our fellow human beings too often gets swept away and filed permanently in the cabinet labeled, "to be done when I get around to it." At the end of our lives that could be an enormous file.

I think all of us need to start emptying that file now and if you don't know where to start here's a sample prayer that might inspire you. It goes:

You will hardly believe your ears, lord, since, as you know, I like to divide my time equally between feeling sorry for myself, and asking you to make things better for me. But just this once, I'd like to thank you for all those things, beginning with the gift of life itself, that you have showered on me for no earthly reason that I can see, except that unexplainably, in the face of selfishness and ingratitude, You love me.

And beyond existence, bounty, beauty, besides thought and sight and sound, color, play, cool water and good food, love and laughter, friends and home, you gave us yourself in your son and through him a promise that the one great catch in your bounty -- death -- was now revoked beyond the grave.

But even this time I'm going to end with a request, forgive me, please, the next time my insensitive self asks, "What have you done for me lately?"