

## WHY PAUL WAS THANKFUL

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"Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift" 2 Corinthians 9:15

Last year a Japanese student who is a follower of Zen read at a gathering here a little poem he had written. The poem made use of words in order to point to the inability of words to say what matters most.

Christianity knows a similar paradox. Christians sometimes are called "the people of the Word." A minister is known in our tradition as "a servant of the Word." The Apostle Paul, who is responsible for much of this word-centered outlook, declares that the one decisive power in human history is "the word of the cross." His whole existence is wrapped up in proclaiming what he calls "the word of life." Of course, the word of which Paul speaks is something more than words. Still, the word of God depends on the words of the apostle in order to be heard. For "How are they to hear without a preacher?"

Therefore, it is all the more striking that in his moments of supreme appreciation Paul finds that words fail him.

"Thanks be to God," he cries, "for his inexpressible gift!"

And as you can see in the bulletin today, the Bible translators cannot even agree on how to put into English the word that Paul uses to point to the limitation of words. "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable, indescribable, priceless...gift beyond words..." But one thing the translators do agree about: Paul is giving thanks for a gift that cannot be put into words.

And yet we would like to know what that gift is, wouldn't we? Here we confront the preacher's dilemma, as old as Elijah and as recent as the new intern at St. John's by the gas station. I have often thought that medicine was a tragic calling; sooner or later a doctor loses all his patients. But think of the preacher who is under orders, and divine orders at that, to say what cannot be said.

Well, let us take the plunge anyway. We would like to know why Paul was thankful. Let us suppose that Paul had counted his blessings one by one, What would he have come up with?

Health, maybe. It is said that "If you have your health you have just about everything." But let us bear in mind that Paul is writing long before the age of geritol. He couldn't count on blessings such as that to see him through. He must have had a rugged constitution. Otherwise, it is hard to see how he could keep going so strong through imprisonment, beating, shipwreck, and all those one night stands in cheap motels. Yet though he seems to have been durable, Paul was not free of medical problems. He speaks of having to overcome an ailment he calls his "thorn in the flesh." Various interpretations have been given of this saying. That he had epilepsy, for example. I have even heard it suggested that he was talking about his wife! But, of course, such theories are fanciful, and we do not know what Paul's problem was. I am sure that Paul was glad for such health as he possessed, but I doubt very much that he thought of his health as God's inexpressible gift.