

Sunday 4 October 2020

HARVEST THANKSGIVING

Readings: Deuteronomy 8.7-18;
2 Corinthians 9.6-end; Luke 17.11-19

Sadly this year at harvest thanksgiving we're unable to sing hymns in church because of the pandemic. Some of the most beautiful harvest hymns are epitomes of praise and thanksgiving, which is the essence of the harvest message – thanking God for his bountiful goodness. We needn't allow ourselves to be totally deprived, though, and can delve into our hymn books (or the internet) at home, and have a good sing of some harvest favourites.

God is good, and provides for our needs but, as we're warned in the reading from Deuteronomy, having too much – more than we need - can separate us from God. That brings to mind the parable from Luke's gospel (Chapter 12) of the man who planned to build even bigger barns to store all his wealth. We've spoken before about how unnecessary things – the consumer goods of this life - can fail to satisfy, and cause division between us and God.

And then Paul in his letter to the Corinthians warns us not to forget to be generous, stressing that "he who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully". We will reap what we sow. We must remember not only to thank God for what we have, but to share what we have with those who have less than us. Notably, our harvest food donations in church today will go direct to local people who are finding things difficult.

All that we have comes from God. Although we may grow much of our own food, for instance, ultimately it's God's gift to us as a result of the ability and strength he gives us, the weather He sends, the soil conditions He provides. However proud we may be of ourselves for our achievements in life, the salaries we've earned, the food we've grown, we should remember that whatever we have is God's gift, wrought by his power and might and grace. God gives us the very air we breathe, our presence of mind, our articulation of speech. It's He who keeps our hearts beating in our chests and blood coursing through our veins.

Therefore God expects us to be thankful, in the same way that Jesus expected ten lepers to be thankful in our Gospel reading today from Luke 17.

Now, if we had a child at school who came home and announced that in a test they got one answer right out of ten, we probably wouldn't consider that they'd done very well, and might have to take steps to help them to improve. If one of my grandchildren told me they only got one of their ten spellings right, I'd be very disappointed and would want to help. If a group of us formed a team for a quiz night and in any given section we only got one answer correct out of ten, I'm guessing that we'd be desperately frustrated and possibly quite annoyed with ourselves.

Jesus cured ten lepers. Only one of the ten got it right. He was the one who came back to say thank you. It's so necessary for us to live lives of gratitude – illustrated for us today by the sad lack of it among the ten lepers. But it's easy to forget, isn't it? Or to be lazy and not bother. Or to take a gift for granted, and assume it to be our right.

The gift that Jesus gave these lepers was huge, and life-changing. As lepers, they would have been forced to leave their normal lives, their homes, their livelihoods, their families – their only security in joining with others similarly afflicted. They even had to raise their voices to speak to Jesus – shouting from a distance because of the stigma, and the risk involved in close contact.

Malnutrition can play an important part in the development of leprosy, and nutritional support is included in modern leprosy control programmes in order to reduce the risk of disease in areas where leprosy is common.

Ironically, leprosy is actually one of the less infectious contagious diseases, so for families and communities to reject such people and banish them to fend for themselves was probably the worst thing they could have done. These not-very-contagious people were isolated and would quickly become malnourished, and so the disease would advance more rapidly. Thus the journey from regular society to the leper colony rarely involved a return trip.

So for Jesus to heal these ten was powerful – a huge deal for them. They had families to which they could now return; children; their crafts or work; their communities. They could eat and drink with their families again, and sleep in their own beds. They could regain their independence and self-esteem as useful members of society.

But this story not only reminds us of the wonderful power of Jesus to heal; it also tells us much about someone, a Samaritan, who was an "outsider".

But, to Jesus, no-one is an outsider. Absolutely no-one is outside His love and His healing. And it has to be the same for us. The very notion that there are some people who are considered "outsiders" should be

completely alien to us. This is all about serving others – about serving everyone – regardless of their skin colour, faith, gender, age, or anything else.

David Attenborough, when speaking in an interview just this week about the future of the planet, was asked for one piece of advice for us all. “Don’t waste anything”, was his reply. His recommendation was that we all value this planet’s precious resources – water, electricity, fuel, food – not wasting one bit of it.

In the same way that nine out of ten lepers took Jesus’ healing for granted, it’s easy for us to take for granted the precious resources of the planet and fail to give thanks.

Do we always give thanks before our meals? If not, then perhaps we should remember those who have no food, especially those right here in our own community struggling to provide food for their families.

Even if we do remember to give thanks to God before our meals, I wonder if we take for granted what’s on our tables? It’s all too easy to take for granted food piled high on supermarket shelves just waiting for us to make our selection. Many of you, like me, may recently have taken to ordering food on line. If you have, you’ll also know how easy that is – pressing a few keys on the computer, and waiting for it to be delivered a few days later, as if by magic. It becomes all too easy for us to take it all for granted.

Carry out a little exercise and check your food cupboard. I found olives from Greece; orange juice from Spain; tuna from way out in the Atlantic; wine from New Zealand; tomatoes from Italy; baked beans from the USA; pineapple from South America. I could go on. It’s mind-blowing. Instead of taking it for granted, let’s give thanks, but not only for the food itself, but also for the complexities of the food chain and the logistics of getting it into our homes.

And how much do we waste? Do we ever throw away good food? Leave the tap on unnecessarily? The car engine running? Do we waste electricity? These are all precious resources from God’s beautiful, but finite, planet and we really shouldn’t waste anything. We need to give thanks continually. We need to serve others. And we need to share what we have with our brothers and sisters who have less.

May God make us mindful of all these things, that we overflow with love and gratitude for Him and with generosity and caring to our neighbours. Amen.

Annie Billson