THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible readings

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 ("The Collection for Christians at Jerusalem)

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written,

'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures for ever.'

Luke 17:11-19 ("Jesus Cleanses Ten Lepers")

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!' When he saw them, he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, 'Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' Then he said to him, 'Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.'Amen. *(NRSV)*

Today's hymns

We plough the fields and scatter (CH: 229)
Come, you thankful people, come (CH: 233)
Now thank we all our God (CH: 182)
For the fruits of all creation (CH: 231)

Surely it has to be one of the more annoying challenges of any parent, in many cases spanning a great many years. It revolves around two words which you would imagine might be easily remembered yet so often seem to be forgotten. "Don't forget to say thank you to Granny and Grandpa."

"Did you remember to thank Mr Smith for the strawberries?"

(In tones of near desperation) "What do you say???"

And if that sounds insulting to the younger generation, we might also just about manage to remember our parents saying it to us in our childhood years.

Today is all about thank yous, whether thank yous to God or thank yous to all the people who through hard work, risk, rain, hail, sleet and snow bring our food from their places of often very hard labour to our kitchen tables. Without our thank yous the agriculture and fishing communities would undoubtedly still be able to make a living. Yet without their food, we would die … and it's every bit as simple as that.

We owe our health, our fitness and - yes! - our very lives to the women and men who supply us with the raw produce and the finished products which we buy. So pausing at the close of harvest to say a very considerable "THANK YOU!" is surely the least we can do. And you never know: as we give our thanks to the food suppliers, we might just end up with a happy reply of "YOU'RE WELCOME!", as happened to me only last week. As I mentioned in a recent "wee thought" which I placed on the internet, I had bought a new type of peanut butter and I quickly found liked it so very much that I ended up taking out an open-ended five-weekly subscription to it. (Strange, I freely admit, yet true.) On the safe arrival of my first kilo tub of the wondrous goo, I felt moved to write to the small company that had produced this dark roast sensation, simply to express both my wonderment and my thanks. And a few days later I received this reply from someone called Mary:
"That's so great to hear, welcome to the dark roast side, as we say!"

Their excellent produce was rewarded with thanks. Then my thanks were, in turn, rewarded with a kind acknowledgement. In our cut-throat world of faceless, anonymous multinational conglomerates, that kind of exchange has to be a good thing. Everyone thrives when thanks are in the air.

When the gospel writer Luke put pen to parchment somewhere near the end of the first century, he almost certainly had to decide on which stories of Jesus he was going to include, and which he would leave out. In the case of our reading this morning I find it positively charming that he chose to keep this very short tale of 10 men with a skin disease who had been made whole by Jesus. Why did Luke keep the account of their meeting? What purpose did it serve? And what can we learn from it being in our Bibles nearly 2000 years later?

In reality, it all comes down to thankfulness. As we heard in the reading, all 10 men were made clean and went on their way rejoicing. But one - a Samaritan - "turned back, praising God with a loud voice". He came up to Jesus, fell at his feet and simply said thank you.

The other men made no effort to return, and these nine actually came from the same community as Jesus himself. Could it be that in some way they simply took him for granted? Perhaps they had seen him in action and had come to realise that this was the kind of miracle which had rightly made him famous. Jesus the healer could heal. What's so unusual? Yet the Samaritan came from a different community - one that was reviled by people of the Jewish faith. For a Jewish healer to choose to heal him was not only a miracle, it was a staggering turn-around in expectations.

"Jesus," he might well have thought in awe and in wonder. "Jesus, healing *me*? This calls for thanksgiving straight out of the top drawer."

So thank Jesus he did.

If we were to stop and consider this story as a possible parallel of our own lives, I am sure that it wouldn't take us too long to come up with some pretty similar instances of an unexpected happening or of an intervention from a stranger in a foreign land that took your own breath away in the past. If it had been the kindness of a friend you might not even have batted an eyelid, but personal concern which is shown by someone you don't know could easily make you go, "Wow! Thank you!"

Equally, maybe you have been the one to show kindness to someone you don't know, resulting in thankfulness which you might never have expected - quite possibly leading on to a deep and long-lasting friendship. Changing the wheel of a car; assistance when a family member suddenly became ill; unexpected help in a dire emergency; some simple hospitality for people who were tired and far from home. Little encounters like that can be incredibly meaningful, can't they?

One of my favourite theological writers, Tony Robinson, puts it very well:
"At least sometimes, strangers and outsiders seem to notice, more acutely than insiders, the grace and beauty of such occasions. What we may take for granted, they view as dazzling gift."

What simple, everyday "dazzling gift" can you offer? And no, not in order to (in some deliberate, intentional sense) draw out thanks from the grateful recipient, but just in order to do what's right. In one sense, maybe that's the secret of all good giving of good gifts: that the giving should be the giving of an action or an object which is simply right to be passed from one person to another. And what of the thankfulness? Spontaneous, heartfelt, joyous and unreserved.

In this story, says Leith Fisher, "healing grace <u>overflows the bounds</u>". I really like that idea because we each know that we have bounds of our own - boundaries which might be drawn around us very tight … or a bit more loose. Each person knows what their personal space is like and each has a perfect right to have their boundaries respected. But every so often, just once in a while, those borderlands between the other and ourselves can be breached by acts of kindness, and it's all we can do to say: "That is just <u>so</u> good of you. Thank you!"

Is it not at moments such as these that we find ourselves in the same renewed skin as that happy and astonished Samaritan who, unlike his companions, rushes back for an outpouring of true thankfulness? Did he <u>know</u> what he was doing as he threw himself down at Jesus' feet, showering him with spur-of-the-moment gratitude? Or did he suddenly … amazingly … as if out of nowhere, find his deep inner well of thankfulness whereby healing grace overflows the bounds?

At this season of harvest we have a golden, autumn opportunity to sing our praise to God for all of his many kindnesses and mercies which span the year and which flow from year … to year … to year. It is good that at times such as this we can pull away from those familiar old patterns of buying and consuming, again and again. We don't need to fall for the lie that keeps on telling us our food comes from this aisle of a supermarket or that deep freeze compartment in the corner shop. We are lavished with good things which come to us every single day from the farming community, from the fishing community, from people at home, from people overseas, from transporters, from warehousers, from wholesalers, from retailers … and - ultimately - from God. Give thanks with a grateful heart. Amen.

Praying for others

Lord,
surely you have made our world and you have made us all.

We look out upon our places in our most beautiful country at this time of early autumn. We see golden fields, recently harvested of the good grain.
Some fields lie as if decorated with bales of straw.
All the goodness of the land comes to us in due season and good time in the food and sustenance which we have in abundance.

Yet we know of many who do not have a good share of the bounty of the earth, many who are hungry even here in our own nation – in villages, towns and cities.
We know of so many in other lands where natural disasters have come upon them – droughts and floods, so that there is so much need.
We see most clearly the dreadful floods in Pakistan.
These are all your people and we owe them our concerns and prayers.

Help us to join together with our brothers and sisters in doing what we can to help, especially in supporting agencies like Christian Aid and the Disasters Emergency Committee and closer to home our local food agencies.

We ask your blessings widely across all the earth and all its peoples.

Amen.

And finally ...

Robin Hill considers a simple way in which poverty is addressed through food:
A few months ago I was surprised - almost troubled - to see an office on Tranent High Street which was advertising "Fa'side Community Pantry" inside. "What?" I thought. "But that's just a few yards from East Lothian Foodbank. Why on earth are they copying a charity that is already doing a very professional job getting much-needed food to people who need it?"

And so I looked into what this new arrival was about and what it might seek to achieve across the county. The office, I had known for some time, to be the base for "Volunteer Centre East Lothian", whose aim is, "to build empowered, resilient communities with a thriving third sector". Through education, training and a wide range of community-building initiatives, it looks to make East Lothian a better, fairer place where the many skills of individuals can be given space to blossom for the benefit of all.

When it comes to food, they identified a small scale (but still real) need for a place where anyone could go for immediate help with food without any kind of referral from a GP, a council worker, a school, a church, etc. In other words, it is open to all with no questions asked and no requirement to show need of any kind.

On a recent visit to the Volunteer Centre for a meeting with one of its wonderful staff members, I was told that food stocks are currently low. That's why this week's Harvest Thanksgiving will go to benefit our local Community Pantry through our donations of tins, packets, jars - anything, in fact, that can be stored easily and bring nutritious food to people who need it. If you can, please give generously!

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