

**THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE**28<sup>th</sup> September 2003

Harvest Service Thanks for the fruit of the harvest

*Saying Thank-You*

How many times in your life have you said “Thank You”?

If you are anyway polite, you will probably use these words many times a day – from the cup of tea made in the morning before work, through the odd door held open for you, you might say “Thank You” a dozen or more times a day – that’s well over 100,000 times by the time you’re in your 30s!

But how many times have you been really, really grateful to someone for what they have done for you? How many times have you recognised the importance of what they have done, perhaps because the consequences would have been serious had they not done it? Or because you really enjoyed whatever it was they gave you?

When we took Samuel to see the robot wars robots in action at Wicksteed Park the other week, he must have said thank-you a dozen times while we were there – he really did appreciate the special occasion, and somehow just saying “thank-you” didn’t seem enough for him to convey his gratitude. And when a young Nathan got stuck a few feet up a cliff in Aberdeenshire, he was most grateful to his Uncle Douglas who came to the rescue. Such occasions are much more rare – perhaps only one or two a year – so hardly make it onto the scale at all.

Of course we do appreciate the gifts we receive on Birthdays and at Christmas. We say thank-you, and if we are really good we write a thank-you note back to the giver. While such gifts are welcome, they are not vital to our health or well-being; and we have so many toys/gadgets/clothes or whatever that we easily become not so much ungrateful as blasé about them.

Equally when we are invited out for dinner, and enjoy a good meal with some generous friend, we dutifully say thank-you and compliment the cook on the quality of the food. We may be grateful for the pleasure such good food gives, but it was not a matter of life and death, and so our gratitude has its limits.

Matthew Scott, the British tourist who escaped from his Columbian kidnappers last week, had quite a different reaction when he found the Kogui tribe, was taken back to their village, and fed. For not only had he suffered the terror of the kidnapping, the ordeal of a long forced march through the jungle, and the drama of an escape down the misty mountain not knowing where he was or which direction to go in; but he had hardly any food for nearly two weeks.

The tribes-people only had soup, beans and oranges to share with him, but he must have felt far more gratitude for that humble meal than he had for any other meal in his life.

For the more desperate we are for something, the more grateful we are to receive it.

### *Spoiled rotten?*

So today, as we rarely if ever feel real pangs of hunger, we are not really thankful for our food. If we remember to say grace before diving in – as few people do these days – it is most often a perfunctory prayer said more out of routine and duty than out of gratitude in our hearts for our food. Indeed, I sometimes wonder if people realise that we eat food to stay alive, and not just out of some hedonistic pleasure from the taste of the latest dish!

Because our lives are so comfortable, with warm and dry houses, cars to save us even the shortest of walks, Tesco to provide limitless supplies of food round the clock, because we are so pampered we have become, perhaps unwittingly, ungrateful for what we have.

Now for some, the lack of gratitude arises because they don't think they have anyone to thank. The whole operation of the food chain is no longer a mystery, so we no longer have to hedge our bets by thanking various deities for the provision of our food. There is no fear of a spiteful god blighting next year's harvest, which for many millennia was the driving force behind harvest festivals all over the world.

But it is only a few who are so reasoned in their failure to thank. For most of us, we are behaving like the spoilt brat who no longer appreciates the value of lavish gifts, because he has so many of them. When it comes to food, we are spoiled rotten.

### *The root of our ingratitude*

So how can we recapture the truly thankful heart that we really ought to have? Should we starve ourselves for a week just so that we appreciate the next meal more? Should we have pictures of starving people from the third world on the wall so that we remember how fortunate we are and give thanks? How do we maintain our sense of gratitude to God for the "basic" necessities of life, when those necessities are in such plentiful supply?

The very fact that we can ask such a question indicates that there is something more seriously wrong with our attitude than a simple lack of thanks! Standing back a bit from it, what we are saying is that the *more* blessings we have the *less* we are likely to be grateful! Logically speaking, you would think that gratitude would be in proportion to blessing. For example, someone who wins £10 in the lottery is unlikely to think the lottery is quite as wonderful as the person who wins £10 million!

But somehow it doesn't work like that. The more we have, the more we want and so in fact the less we appreciate what we do already have. That is very apparent when we spend time with someone from another culture, like Barrack, and consider just how well off we really are compared to most people in the world today. This is not to say that we are any worse people than they are in Kenya; for if we were to take them and give them the same lifestyle we have, it would not be very long before they forget their initial sense of thankfulness for material blessings, and begin to join in the rat-race with everyone else.

And so, if our eyes can really be opened to it, we come to realise that there is something we need more than food and clothing. For such basic necessities allow us to go on living, but can do nothing to change the sort of life we will build for ourselves – which will inevitably be tainted by our greed and pride.

### *Famine of the heart*

What we really need is to be set free from such forces, but they are so prevalent around us that few people stop to question whether this is possible. They fall into the worst kind of slavery – a slavery which they accept as normal and so will never escape from.

No matter how advanced our society becomes; no matter what advances in science and technology, we will never be able to provide this essential need for ourselves. We have made tremendous progress in harnessing nature to our ends. Whatever we think of the intensive farming practices – and indeed world trade - which allows this, it is a marvellous achievement to have created a society where no-one needs to go to bed hungry or without shelter.

Yet we have blatantly failed to address the deeper famine of the human heart. And left to our own devices, we never shall. In fact, the further we have gone in control of the external world around us, the deeper the problem of the internal world has become. Our society reaps an abundant harvest of grape and grain, but when it comes to true quality of life, we are desperately malnourished.

This summer's heat-wave brought that home in a shocking way in France, where hundreds of old people died from the extreme conditions, but their families were too busy getting on with their own lives to notice! While many do have a desire, somewhere deep down, to leave the rat-race and return to a more basic way of life, few ever do anything about it. When they do, they often choose a remote place like my erstwhile home, the Isle of Arran, to do it; but they seldom last more than a few years, after which they succumb to the desire for more of the conveniences of modern life.

For it is not simply a matter of re-discovering a simpler lifestyle. That may remove some of the distractions of our hectic life, but it does not change the heart of the problem, which is the human heart.

### *Seed for the real harvest*

But there is an answer to this. Just as there can be no harvest of grain without seed first being sown, so there will be no harvest of worthwhile fruit in our lives unless a seed is planted there first. That seed is God's word itself, which if taken into our lives can cause us to come to faith in Him, and then through his life within us he can set us free from greed, pride, and whatever else besets us.

I'm not saying that no one can do any good unless they are Christians. It is clear that many people are driven to help others rather than themselves, from a variety of motivations. But whenever something good is done, God has something to do with it; and no matter how much good a person does, that does not make up for the wrong that they have done, or said, or thought. God does not weigh our lives in a balance with good deeds on one side and bad on another; if he did, then there would be no need for Christ to have come to die for us, for we could save ourselves.

You see, the reason why pride and greed, and all other "sins", are so bad is because of the affect they have on our relationship with God. However hard we try to deal with these things, however much effort we put into living in harmony with nature and with each-other, there will always be something missing, unless we are also living in harmony with God.

This is the first and foremost harvest that we should be looking for, as Jesus pointed out to those who followed him in hope of receiving more free food after he had fed the 5000:

<sup>26</sup> *Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. <sup>27</sup> Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."*

<sup>28</sup> *Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"*

<sup>29</sup> *Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."*

<sup>30</sup> *So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?" <sup>31</sup> Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"*

<sup>32</sup> *Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. <sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."*

<sup>34</sup> *"Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."*

<sup>35</sup> *Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."<sup>1</sup>*

Once we realise that we are totally dependent on God for this spiritual life, then it is easier to see that we are, in fact, totally dependent on him for physical life too. Yes, western man has tamed nature and provided enough food for himself for many decades now – for as long as any of us has been alive. But that grip is more fragile than it appears, as many a disaster movie involving asteroids or mystery viruses show us. Or consider even the electrical power-cuts which have been hitting the headlines this summer – without electricity, our food supply would be in serious jeopardy.

But even without such drama, God is the creator of the earth we live on. It was he who laid down its foundations, who made the resources that we exploit today. So we truly ought to thank Him for our harvest, even when it was bought from Tesco's.

### *Raving Thankfulness*

Sometimes people think that God is a bit of an ego-centric, to demand our thanks and praise each harvest time, if not each meal time. But when seen in context, this is not a means of humiliating us, but actually of increasing the blessing God gives us. Notice what he says when he laid down the regulations for the Jewish harvest festivals, as we read earlier.

These were not sombre or solemn occasions – they were times of great joy. They were like raves for the whole community, in the sense that they lasted a whole week, with lots of music and singing and dancing. God knows how to throw a party all right! His provision for them was something to rejoice in. The abundance of their harvests was not something to be ashamed of, but to celebrate – and, most importantly, to share.

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<sup>1</sup>The Holy Bible : New International Version. 1984; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996 (electronic edition.) (Jn 6:26-35). London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Did you notice in our reading from Deuteronomy 16 that the festivities included the whole community? No-one was excluded – those who could not provide for themselves, such as orphans and widows, were to be looked after by the community. Even foreigners living or just visiting amongst them were to be included. Throughout the Bible, this theme appears with great forcefulness: that God expects those who have to share those who have not. And he will bless us when we obey.

These festivals were a great way of combating some of the problems we have today – by making thanksgivings the high points of the social year, people were reminded and motivated to thank God frequently; and by insisting that the poor were looked after by the well-off, the tendency towards greed would be tempered with generosity.

There is much that we can learn from this. We should not feel guilty in the abundance of our wealth compared to the rest of the world; indeed, we should thank God for what he provides us with, rather than being miserable because of our luxuries! But at the same time, we must not turn a blind eye to the sufferings of the poor and needy. We should be more concerned to do what we can to help them, than to pander to our own greedy desires for more.

That is a tough lesson to put into practice. In fact, we will not be motivated to make this our way of life by feeling guilty when we listen to sermons or see a picture of another famine in Africa. The only motivation powerful enough to do this is true selfless Love.

And where does such love come from?

Well that too is a fruit of God's seed in our life. How desperate are you for that harvest?