

Sunday 15<sup>th</sup>. October 2017  
Harvest Thanksgiving  
'He who brings thanksgiving as his offering honours me.' Ps. 50.23

Hosea 2.5-15 and 1Corinthians 3.5-9

In times past, harvest was a special time. The crops had been gathered in, and there was now time to have a rest after a period of long hours of physical work in gathering in all the produce. Family and friends gathered all over the country at their local congregations to give God thanks for the bounty that He had given, and often large quantities of produce were brought to church, and distributed to the shut ins and elderly. For many, it was an expression of gratitude for bounty received.

This does not happen today. Global trade means that we can get any food product at any time of the year – if we are prepared to pay a price. As a consequence, there is a loss of connection with the land and seas because we no longer eagerly await the first strawberries or plums of a season. When they are out of season in the UK, we can obtain them from elsewhere in the world. We are so used to this now that we feel hard done by if we cannot buy what we want, when we want it!

As the years have passed, Harvest Thanksgiving Services have become stranger and stranger. We no longer see sheaves of grain and earth covered produce brought to the front of the church building. Neither do we see the farmers and fishermen and horticulturalists, but we do see tins of carrots and peas, soup and pasta, all bought in the supermarket and made and imported from all over the world. Harvest is now at any and all times of the year.

However, globalization and importing are not the only reason why Harvest Thanksgiving Services have become less well attended. There is a more fundamental reason for this, and it is the matter of gratitude and thanksgiving to God.

The book of Hosea is a prophetic book from the period 760BC to 720BC. Hosea prophesied in the period leading up to the nation of Israel being taken to Assyria as captives, after the fall of Samaria. This was probably the event spoken of, 'that God would lure His wayward people into a desert place and there speak tenderly to them.' His message was one of heart broken judgment to come, and gentle promises that God would win His erring bride back.

We know the story, I hope, of Israel. A people chosen by God and delivered by God from Egypt. They were led through the wilderness to the Promised Land, but the generation that came out of Egypt failed to enter because of unbelief. The excuse was that the Promised Land was too dangerous for them to enter, and if they did, their children would suffer and die. As it turned out, it was Joshua who led those very children into the Land, once the unbelieving generation of parents had died out. Never use your children as excuses not to obey God!

We know this story, but have a look at Deuteronomy chapter 4 verses 1-8. What these verses are telling us is that the Hebrew people entering the Promised Land was only the beginning of their story. God wanted them to live in such a way that the surrounding nations would be in awe of them and the goodness of their God. They were to be a nation of light in the darkness, a people who would show the glory of God by their life and witness, and so be the evangelists of God to the whole world. Sadly it did not happen. However, even though the Jews are cut out of God's vine at the moment, He has not finished with them, because God's promise still remains, and a day will come when the Jews will recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Until that day, pray for the Jewish people all over the world and in Israel. God has a plan for the Arabs too, so pray for them also!

The astonishing thing about this history is that the people missed the purpose of God. How could such a thing happen?

About a hundred years later, the prophet Jeremiah, speaking to the people on the eve of the Babylonian Captivity makes this diagnosis of the condition of Judah, which also held true of Israel. In Chapter 2 verse 13 he says this,

‘My people have committed two sins:  
They have forsaken me,  
the spring of living water,  
and have dug for themselves cisterns,  
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.’

The people had departed from God, and had undertaken to be self-made people. We know from history that this was a disaster to that generation, and every other generation that separated from God. They thought that they were masters of their own souls! The Old Testament is full of calls by the prophets to the people to remember where they had come from, and who had brought them there, but mostly this word fell on deaf ears. The Psalms are also full of calls to remember who God is and what He has done. Read Psalm 145, and notice how many Psalms begin with a call to praise God or words of praise.

Hosea rightly stated the sad condition of the people of Israel when He expresses Gods message. Chapter 2 verse 8 reports the words of God.

‘She has not acknowledged that I was the one  
who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil,  
who lavished on her gold and silver and gold –  
which they used for Baal.’

Mention of grain, wine, oil, silver and gold is the way of expressing the sum total of all of life's merchandising, joys and prosperity. It is an old way of speaking of Gross National Product!

The people had forgotten where their provision came from. They had forgotten the Exodus, the provision of God in the wilderness, the entry into the Land, the victories, the productivity that arose from the land. The result of this was that they attributed what they had to the work of their own hands and did not give thanks to God, acknowledge Him as the giver, and were wretched in their ingratitude! I am sure I am not the only adult here who is less inclined to give an ungrateful child another sweetie or treat. We like it that people say please and thank-you, and not just 'gimme', or 'gimme now!'

The people failed because they forgot that God was the giver, the source of all life and blessing. Sounds just like today! It is bad enough when unbelievers do not give thanks to God, but when Christians and Church goers consider themselves as self-providers, then the situation is very, very serious.

Read Revelation chapter 3 verses 14 to 22. Verse 17 tells us of this churches attitude to themselves.

“You say, 'I am rich: I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.'  
But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.’

That church no longer exists. One of the reasons for their fall was that they were so taken up with what they did, that they forgot that all good gifts come from above. They did not render to God the thanks which is His due. I think that much of the church in the West is like this. Words are said and sung, but we do not behave as we should if we believed that everything we have is a gift from God.

What is the anti-dote to this?

The hint has already been given. It is to render thanks to God, but thanks that comes from the heart in the realization that we owe everything to God. A heartless thankyou is worse than no thanks at all. We all hate it when someone says this sterile, dead thankyou to us, yet we think God should be grateful to us for any gratitude we show!

C.H. Spurgeon, a great old Baptist of a former generation commenting on an expression of praise in a Psalm said this. 'He who gives thanks for every mercy received, will not often be in want of a mercy for which to give thanks.' He is right when he says that! If you read the Psalms, I am sure that you will have noticed that they are full of praise to God, and encouragements for others to join in and also praise God. Psalm 138 begins,

‘I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart;’

There are some observations that should be made even about a phrase as short as this. In a few words, David has said a world of truth. Praise is to be whole hearted. Praise is something that we do intentionally, 'I will.' Note that David gives us the reason for his offering of praise. He recalls in verse 3 a situation where he called out to God

and was heard, and God responded by giving him strength. However, do you see that even before he mentions the prayer and its answer, he praises God for His love and faithfulness. He praises God first for who God is, then for what He has done. You see, there is never a time not to praise God. Even if our prayer does not seem to have been answered or is delayed in its answer, we can praise God as we meditate on who He is in Himself.

It would pay rewards to read through the whole book of Psalms and mark up the verses that express praise, and in a different colour, mark up the reasons why the Psalmist gives praise. Even if it takes a year to do this, it would be well worth the effort, and as many Psalms are short, it would not take as long as you may think! Go on, have a go!

Some people may say that they do not have much to thank or praise God for. Perhaps you might be thinking how can the poor, and the refugees, and the sick, and the bereaved, and the homeless be thankful to God. I had the privilege of visiting a very impoverished South American country. The Christians there had very little in terms of worldly goods, health care, home comforts, and many other things we enjoy, but when they praised, they praised! Do you remember what were once called Negro Spirituals? The slaves were people who praised God, for the hope that lay before them, for heaven. There is always reason to render praise and thanks to God.

There are two reasons why we should praise God. Firstly for temporal blessings, and secondly for spiritual blessings.

Temporal blessings.

Are you alive? Who gave us life? God, that's who! Science speaks about creating life, but it is killing a lot of stuff as it tries to find this strange thing we may call the spark of life! Did we eat yesterday? Do we have a roof over our head? Did we get some sleep last night? Are we reasonably healthy? Do we have someone who loves us in our lives? Then these are worthy things to give thanks for. Someone might say about food and home that they have worked hard to provide for the purchase of these things. Fair enough, but who gave you the strength and the intelligence to do the work that earns the wage, that buys the food? There are many people who have neither the health, strength nor ability to get a well paid job! What do we have that is not a gift from God? Nothing apart from sin!

Spiritual blessings

These are blessings that God gives to Christians, and are the best blessings. I will confine myself to mentioning the three supreme gifts from God which come in Christ. The three supreme graces that God gives are faith, hope and love. These are the three supreme graces, and these form the platform from which every other spiritual gifts are given. For example. How are we made right, righteous before God? We receive justification, one of the benefits of the shed blood of Jesus by faith. Without faith, we can receive nothing from God, and faith is itself a gift. It is important if we have faith, that we use it to ask God to increase our faith!

In 1 Corinthians chapter 3, verses 5 to 9, Paul uses the example of the farmer to show from where all good comes. The farmer works hard to plough and sow and nurture and harvest, but all of this would be to no avail if God did not give the growth, the life to the seed. It is the same principle in fisheries and livestock. It goes beyond this to all the employments and activities we engage in. Back of it all is God giving the life.

All of life is a gift of God, and we dishonor Him when we do not render the thanks and praise due to Him. Do you remember what happened when Jesus came to Jerusalem for the last time before the Cross? Luke 19 verses 28 to 40 tell of His 'Triumphal Entry.' Do you remember what happened? The people had been praising Him and shouting out 'Blessed is the King.' The Pharisees took exception to this and called on Jesus to stop the people doing this. Jesus replied,

'if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.'

This means that if people do not praise and thank God, then the dumb creation will do so, rather than have Jesus denied His right!

Thanksgiving and praise are not just for Harvest time, and probably with school holidays and the general ingratitude of people, the Harvest Thanksgiving will be muted somewhat. When we assume on God's grace, and do not render thanks to God for every blessing, we enter into dangerous territory. The fact that we still receive good things from God is a testimony to His graciousness and faithfulness. If we do not thank Him, the day will come when we see the seas depleted of fish, the soil lose its fertility, and things fail! Well, it's actually happening now, isn't it?

Thanks giving is our duty and reasonable service to God.