

Generosity and Gratitude – Harvest Festival – 1st October 2023

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Pour out gratitude in our hearts O Lord, that we may ever be generous stewards of your creation, and that the world around us may recognise your goodness in the things we do. Amen.

I know we don't all have pets, but I'm sure we all love God's creatures, big and small. Some have dogs, some have cats. And invariably we need to take them to the vet. Now taking a dog to the vet might not be the easiest thing to do, but taking a cat to the vet, can be a real challenge. Especially getting the cat into the cat carrier! 'What's the best technique?' I hear you wonder! Some will try to persuade the cat to go head first, but we know how opinionated cats can be. So sometimes, it's easier to gently ease the cat into the box tail first! It's not so scary, and it's not so awkward for the cat!

And now I'm sure you wonder why on earth I'm telling you all this! Well, it's because – in a way – this gentle coaxing is what Paul did with the people of Corinth when he wrote that second letter to them. He used a bit of coaxing, because he wanted to change their minds and their behaviours towards each other and the poor in their community, and generosity didn't really come naturally to them. Now, when you try to force people to do something, either they will refuse to do it, or they will do it reluctantly, and your relationship with them will be damaged. The trick is turn people's minds and imaginations around, so that what seemed awkward and unnatural now seems the most natural thing in the world.

Paul wanted to tell the Corinthians: 'This is what it is to be God's people – it's about seeing life differently. It's about the whole picture, turning your minds around so that you see everything in a different light – God, the world, the church, yourselves'. In this new light, the hope would be to be transformed into a generous people of God.

So to convince the people of Corinth, and by extension us, Paul uses three passages from Scripture.



The first one is from Proverbs 22 in the Greek translation: 'God blesses a cheerful giver'. Paul says 'sow generously, and you'll reap generously'. And that word, 'generously' is the same word that Proverbs uses for what God will do to a cheerful giver. God will 'bless' them. This promise is not just for the people of Corinth

of course, it extends to all of us. What a powerful statement! 'God blesses a cheerful giver'.

The second passage he quotes from is Psalm 112, speaking again of the people who scatter blessings to the poor: their righteousness endures forever. In the Old Testament, 'righteousness' generally refers to God's faithfulness: God is faithful to the promises he made to his people. But here it also refers to our behaviour, the behaviour by which God's people show their gratitude to God for this faithfulness.



Paul is celebrating those who put their trust in the Lord, and in particular their generosity and merciful behaviour, particularly towards the poor.



The third passage quoted by Paul is even greater than the first two. It is from Isaiah 55, and it says: 'God provides seeds for the sower and bread to eat'. The generosity of God knows no bounds. He will 'sow' his Word just like he sends the rain to provide seed-corn and bread. All our

needs are covered. God is making a new creation in in which everything will be renewed. And that's exactly what Paul is saying in his second letter to the Corinthians: we are living in God's new creation, God's new covenant, accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And Paul concludes with these words: 'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!'



No wonder this passage from the second letter to the Corinthians is often used for Harvest, because it overflows with God's generosity for his people. God gives us the ultimate gift by conquering death itself. How can we not respond to that?

It's like Paul is telling us: 'We are truly blessed! See the faithfulness of God! So let us focus on his kingdom'. Generous giving then becomes natural, because it is our response to God's gift, it is the expression of our thankfulness to God. Every time we share means, money, food, care, warmth, clothes, in our community and in the wider world, we lay new bricks of the kingdom of God. And we spark feelings of gratitude. It is a virtuous circle, born in the love of God. Like Paul says: 'Because of the good you do, others will praise God and will recognise God in what you do, your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God'.

Giving thanks did not come naturally to the people of Corinth, and still today, it is quite counter-cultural. In our present culture, we have become consumers and we tend to think that if we have more, or better, or different, we'll be happier or more

grateful. Caught in the trance of consumption, we forget the gifts received from God, the words received from Jesus, the blessings received from the Spirit.

But cultivating gratefulness can shift our focus, from the petty things to the kingdom of God. It turns us from forgetful children into cheerful givers. It brings us back to the root of our identity as God's people: we have God's blessing, now we can abound in every good work.

In its simplicity, gratefulness is transformative. It enables us to see the ordinary things in our lives as extraordinary – these things are gifts that are good to us, and good to share. Gratefulness is what enables us to grow in faith and generosity.

So let us pray:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
You are with us always;
You supply seed to the sower and bread for food;
You know our every need;
Open our eyes to your great goodness,
and put thankfulness in our hearts;
that out of gratitude to you
we may become generous and cheerful givers.
In Jesus' name.

Amen.

