

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5.19-20.

‘Giving thanks always for all things unto God’. Doesn’t the old AV trip so marvellously off the tongue. ‘Giving thanks always for all things unto God’. Today, of course, is Harvest. I have said before how in England we tend to call it Harvest Festival. This was the result of the efforts of the mid-19th century eccentric Rector of Morwenstow in Cornwall, the Revd R.S. Hawker, to get his rural congregation away from the drunken festivities after the harvest was safely gathered in to something more sober and Christian. Harvest was a matter of life and death. A poor harvest would mean they would starve, so naturally they were exuberant and relieved.

In Ulster it tends to be called Harvest *Thanksgiving*. It was a similar idea, for Ireland knew all about famine and starvation. I have always wondered how all three of my rural congregations in Co Fermanagh were built either during or just after the terrible Famine of the 1840s. How did they manage that? Surely those good Presbyterians then had every excuse under the sun not to contribute to a church-building fund. But they did, and those little churches are still going strong today. I heard just last week that they had 15 children in Tempo, the smallest Sunday School last Sunday. It shews that where there is a will, there is a way. When you put God first, anything is possible. It’s all to do with priorities, isn’t it? So what comes first in your life?

Harvest *Thanksgiving*. ‘Giving thanks always for all things unto God’. I have argued before that saying ‘thank you’ is more than just good manners. Thankfulness is a whole way of life. Thankfulness is an attitude. I have a friend – and some of you may know who I mean when I say this – and it does

not matter when you see him, but if you ask him how he is, he always says. 'I'm blessed'. In fact he is not very well at this moment and is in my prayers, but when I visited him in hospital I asked him how he was. 'I'm blessed'. It's so positive, isn't it? There are some people you ask how they are, and you wish you hadn't. It's all negative, and you can feel the life draining out of you. But we also live today in a culture of complaint, and whinging and permanent victimhood. To say 'thank you' is to acknowledge your indebtedness to another, and that will never do, will it? Did you know that last Friday was World Gratitude Day? If people came to church and attended Harvest Thanksgiving Services, they wouldn't need to have a World Gratitude Day, for that is what church is about – 'giving thanks always for all things unto God'.

Gratitude is surely the gateway to happiness. How can you be happy when you moaning all the time, finding fault, feeling a hard-done to victim? Thankfulness is so positive, while whinging is negative. I am thankful that I was brought up in a stable family. We can all find fault with our parents, but it all depends what specs you are looking at life through. My parents did their best. I thank them that I had a good education. I am thankful every day for health and strength, and useful work to do. Every day I think that your health is your wealth. I thank God I am alive, and that years ago a Sunday School teacher asked me if I wanted to invited Jesus into my life. I am thankful to him. I am thankful to my teachers and all those grown-ups who helped me and gave me a good example. You see, thankfulness is a whole attitude of life.

Today we are discouraged from saying thank you not only to others, but especially to God. Harvest? What has that got to do with God? *We* made those crops grow. *We* planted the seeds, fertilized them, and gathered them

in. Where does God come into that? Yes, humans are very clever and the advances in agriculture are incredible, but we are not the source of life, and we cannot control the weather. Famine and starvation are still very real for millions of people in the world. Even in benign Britain the summer heatwave has had its effect on our crops. It is precisely because there is real need in so many parts of the world, that we at St Paul's support the URC's World Development project known as Commitment for Life which works with Christian Aid. Erica Miller commended Commitment For Life to us last Sunday and I do hope that you will read the pamphlets and give generously. Our four partner areas are Bangladesh, Central America, Israel and the Occupied Territories, and Zimbabwe. Giving your money makes our harvest thanks sincere and meaningful. As God has been generous to us, so we should be generous to others, especially the poorest and most needy in the world.

It's easy to take things for granted, isn't it? We take our nearest and dearest for granted, and sometimes that can be deadly. Marriages can fall apart when we stop appreciating each other. Appreciation and acknowledgement are the oil in our relationships. So it is with God. In our secular society we just take our daily bread for granted. The annual rhythm of harvest, however, reminds us that 'all is safely gathered in' is not a sure thing. God has been extraordinarily generous to us in the west. Today we acknowledge God as the gracious giver of all his gifts of food and creation.

We read in the Bible that famous incident where Jesus healed the ten lepers. Leprosy was then more than just a skin disease which killed the nerves in the limbs and the face. People were frightened of leprosy, because they wrongly thought that being near a leper could cause them to catch it. So

lepers were disfigured, abandoned and rejected with no income. Their lives were wretched beyond belief. They had heard stories of Jesus the miracle healer, so when he came their way, they tried their luck with him. After all, they had nothing to lose. Jesus, as we know, healed them, but here was the point: only one bothered to come back to thank him, and he, oddly enough was a despised Samaritan. They all begged Jesus, 'Please, please, please', but once they got what they wanted, they forgot to say 'thank you' Only one took the trouble to say thank you: only one in ten. Isn't that about the same percentage today who can be bothered to come to church?

And isn't that what we come to church for? It isn't primarily to listen to a lecture from the pulpit. We come first and foremost to say a huge 'thank you' to God for all he has done for us; for loving us, for giving us our daily bread, and for giving us Jesus. We come to church also to *acknowledge* God as the Giver – the Giver of life, the Giver of love, the Giver of food. And what better way than to *sing* our thanks. Aren't the harvest hymns the best? Let's read that wonderful verse in *Eph 5.19-20* again It's so *positive*, so uplifting and mutually encouraging, don't you think? We think that Christians should be *good* people, or *loving* people, but really what sets us apart is that we are *thankful* people. Who would you choose to be with? The moaners and the criticisers, or the thankful? Not only is it right to give thanks to God for all our blessings, but, as I have said, it does *us* good. 'It is a *good* thing to give thanks, and it is a good thing to give thanks to the *Lord*'. Thankfulness is the gateway to happiness and it makes you better *company*. Before you get out of bed tomorrow, think of three things you are grateful for. Turn yourself into a thankful person. Add a sense of wonder; then become a worshipping person.