

Sermon – Sunday 4th October 2020 – Harvest Thanksgiving

It is something that we teach children from a very young age. Saying thank you. I wonder whether you remember how those who brought you up encouraged you to remember to be thankful. Or perhaps how you taught your own children. My mother had “that look” which reminded me. And at Christmas and birthdays we wrote thank you letters. I think perhaps it was thank you letters which made the most difference. Although there were times that it could feel like a chore, I came to enjoy the way that writing a letter felt like building a relationship. I would take time to think about what I wanted to share of the past year, as well as trying to explain as well as I could why the particular gift I had been given was appreciated.

And I wonder whether this morning’s gospel reading isn’t more about that process of transformation that began to happen as I wrote thank you letters than it is about simply parroting the word “thank you” because that’s what you’re taught to do. And of course the two are connected. Because it can be through learning to say thank you that we genuinely become thankful.

In the gospel reading, ten lepers are made clean. We know very little about them except that they ask Jesus to show mercy. And he does so, telling them to go and show themselves to the priests, and making them clean on the way.

And yet, while ten were made clean, only one took the time to say thank you. And not just to say thank you. He praised God and prostrated himself. To add to our discomfort, as so often in the gospels, it is the foreigner who says thank you. It is the person we would least expect to be close to God who somehow shows himself to be the closest.

And that’s why I say that I wonder whether this is more about transformation than it is simply about saying thank you.

Every year at Harvest time, we are encouraged to be thankful. It is what the various hymns declare. It is included in the words of the readings. And it is present as we remember the beauty of creation, bringing our various offerings. It is surely a time when we are keenly aware of our own good fortune if we are able to afford sufficient food to eat, recognising that so many across the world, including in our own country, go hungry.

Perhaps the challenge of this morning’s reading is to ask ourselves what we do with our thankfulness. It can be so easy to express our genuine thanks each year, without necessarily allowing ourselves to be transformed. I wonder if that’s what happened to nine of the ten lepers. They were healed, yes. Their lives will surely have been changed. And yet did they allow themselves to be *transformed*?

It is a question we might be asking ourselves especially this year, too. There is something about a global pandemic that drew us together. While three months of lockdown isolated us physically, there was undoubtedly also a sense of shared purpose. Of commitment to doing what we could to save lives.

And I do believe that we became more thankful people. The most visible sign was every Thursday evening when we faithfully left the comfort of our living rooms and joined in demonstrating our gratitude for those key workers who were on the front line, most especially the NHS. But it was

shown in other ways, too. Those working in supermarkets found themselves thanked more often, the role that they were playing recognised in ways it never had been before. And I think many of us were inclined to notice the spring and summer in ways we hadn't done before. To appreciate the signs of life and hope in the flowering of God's creation.

The question for us all now is whether we will allow ourselves to be transformed. Whether we simply said thank you and have now moved on, or whether we have grown closer to God as a result. Whether thankfulness has truly entered our hearts.

The thing is, I want to be clear that I don't see this morning's gospel reading as hopeless. Far from it. It is true that only one of the ten returned to say thank you. Only one was transformed at the moment of his healing. But I still believe that there is great hope. Because, if you are anything like me, transformation really can take time. As with so much that we hear in the gospels, we are offered a snapshot, and have no idea what happens next. We can only imagine what happened next for each of those ten.

We might hope that the gratitude expressed so freely by the Samaritan burst out into a life of generosity. But there is nothing to suggest that the others couldn't be transformed, too. It might just have taken them a little longer. While they all asked for Jesus's mercy, the reality of finding themselves cured after a long period of illness might have initially been overwhelming. It could have taken time to fully embrace a new life. So much of our life of faith is about growing into the people that God created us to be. For some of those nine, it may have taken time to re-discover their identity as children of God in changed circumstances.

And I say this to bring hope to us all as those who may have said our annual thank yous at Harvest Festivals across the years, but are still discovering what it means to live lives of thankfulness and gratitude. Because we are all works in progress. And while some of us experience sudden transformation, for some it is more gradual.

I have seen the signs of grace and generosity within this community, and been the beneficiary. These past weeks and months have been anything but easy, and yet people still telephone to check how I am, taking time to notice if I sound tired. When I made a particularly difficult decision a couple of weeks ago, someone in their thoughtfulness and generosity wrote a deeply moving email, demonstrating their understanding and most of all holding me in their love. At last week's annual meeting, the most significant desire of those present was to express their thanks to those who have made a difference to their lives.

Harvest is a time to give thanks. And as we give thanks we dare to hope that we will be transformed by our gratitude into the even more generous and thoughtful individuals we were surely created to be. We're all in the process of getting there. Let's welcome God into our hearts once more this Harvest and dare to pray for the kind of transformation that only God can bring.

Amen