

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

## **HARVEST THANKS**

**30<sup>th</sup> Sep 2018**

Proverbs 3:1-10

2 Corinthians 9:6-11

It was a bit of a struggle to know which parts of Scripture we should read today, not because it has nothing to say about giving thanks for God's provision, but because there is so much! From the earliest times the Hebrew people gave thanks to God for their food – even the sad story of Cain and Abel is set in that context. And instructions about offerings for various harvests feature heavily in the code of the law.

In this the Hebrew people were not unique. All the peoples around them would also be offering a portion of their produce and their livestock to their gods. The difference was that the people around offered out of fear and in an act of propitiation, while the Hebrew people were to offer out of gratitude. Most scholars agree that the reason that God accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's was because of their different motivation. Our reading from the wise words of the Proverbs bears this out. In it we are told to "honour" God with our substance and our first-fruits, to honour God, not to appease God.

To bring an offering to God is a way of honouring God. We do it every week when we bring an offering of our money. In many ways for most of us our money is our first-fruits, as few of us depend on what we grow in fields or on the animals we can raise. What we earn with whatever our work is, or has been, is usually the money which we can then spend on our needs. So we honour God with that every week, and we call it an offering, and not just a collection, because an offering is something we give to God, while a collection is just funds raised. Last week we were talking about our stewardship of the world by living generously, and this is a point which Paul picks up on (well, he got there first, actually) when he writes to the church in Corinth. He talks of sowing sparingly and reaping sparingly – remember that the word "meagre" is not a word of celebration or stewardship. And he talks of giving cheerfully, because this is what God loves, and this is how God gives to us. This is how God gives to us, and God gives so that we can be generous.

Now Paul is not just talking about a physical sowing and reaping, because unlike the wisdom of the time of the Proverbs, he was addressing a culture which was more like our own, a culture which was urban, (which we are not, but bear with me) and where most people worked for money, not for physical reward. So Paul is using the language of agriculture to talk about a wider and deeper kind of generosity. Just as Jesus did.

Today we could have read one of many parables Jesus told that were about things growing. Think of them – the parable of the sower, the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the wheat and the tares, the parable of the seed growing secretly. And while all of them reference growth and harvest, really they are all talking about how we live our lives, and how God views the world.

So why did we bring all this food into church today? Is it just a gesture, a metaphor, such as Paul is using, or such as Jesus told stories about? No, and yes. No it is not. This is an offering to God, which we will dedicate in prayer and ask God to use to his glory and to share love and life with those who need the sustenance this food can give. We will be taking this offering of food to the Inverness Foodstuff charity and it will be used to feed people not far from here, people in Inverness who find it hard to feed themselves, either because they cannot afford to or because they do not have the skills to live well independently. It is lovely to see the abundance that is here, to think of all the good meals that can be and will be produced from it and to think of the pleasure that will give people. It is lovely to see the generosity of you people when you know there is a need, and when you want to thank God for your plenty. So no this is not just a metaphor – far from it. This is concrete offering of thanks to God.

And yet it is a metaphor. This display of giving is a metaphor for all the hidden ways that you give in your generous lives. It is a metaphor for the way that all of God's children are called to live with others, in giving and providing and not thinking of ourselves. This abundant offering stands also for all the money you put in the bag (or by bank transfer) week by week – which no one sees. It stands for the ways you give to charity. It stands for the hospitality you offer strangers. It represents the way you take on voluntary work, in the church or elsewhere. It represents all the abundant and generous giving you do, giving of yourself as well as your goods. And all offered to God.

And it goes even deeper. Because when we live giving to others as an offering to God, then we cannot help but be growing more into the likeness of God's children, more into the likeness of Jesus. Living generously, giving and giving and giving is all part of the discipleship that Jesus asks of us. Discipleship means learning, and while there is head learning to be done, a lot of what we learn, we learn by doing. It is more like an apprenticeship than taking a degree!

I know that some urban churches wonder about the relevance of having a harvest thanksgiving service, since so little of what our shops offer now is based on a seasonal harvest. And I know that if we were to have our thanksgiving when the farmers around here have their harvest it would probably be in May when the crop of lambs has arrived. It doesn't matter when we pause to give and give thanks, but I think it is important that we should, because giving and giving thanks is part of what reveals the image of God in us, part of what is important in following Jesus and learning from him.

When Jesus called the twelve disciples to come and follow him, he meant it literally: they were to follow him and learn by watching all that he did. We are going to think a lot more about our own discipleship in the next few weeks, but meanwhile we should remember this: Jesus thanked God before he broke the bread and fed the five thousand. Jesus thanked God before he broke the bread and passed it around during the last supper. He didn't insist on lots of other laws that were around regarding the preparing and eating of food, but he did think it was important to give thanks.

Jesus also gave. At that last supper when Judas went out – in fact to betray Jesus – John tells us that the other disciples didn't wonder at it, because they thought he must be going to give something to the poor. In other words, giving to the poor was a common thing in Jesus' company, so common that it could be assumed. Jesus and the disciples lived on what was given them, often by women, but they still gave

to others from what they had. That is because giving is an act of trust. When we give this food today we are trusting God that he will provide for us and that we will not rue the day that we gave this away, because we are hungry ourselves. We give because we know that what we have is only lent by God and because we trust that God's generosity will not fail us.

Last week, when we were thinking about casting our bread generously upon the waters, after the service one person told me that once a friend of her had said to her "You cast your bread upon the waters and it always comes back to you as buttered toast!" Those who do not give cannot know the joy of receiving from God's generous hand, because those who do not give are living with their hands closed on what they have and so their hands are not able to have what God has put into them. Those who give know that by God's grace open-handedness is not empty handedness. So today we give thanks to God for our food, and for the harvest that feeds us locally and around the world. Today we thank God and we give to those who do not have our plenty. We do it because giving thanks and giving away are what Jesus did and would have us do. We do it because when we think of all that God gives to us, our hearts are full and need to find a way of showing the gratitude we have. We do it in faith and trust and we do it with joy, for "God loves a cheerful giver." Amen.

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