

Harvest Thanks

Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. – (*ask people to try saying this repeatedly out loud*) – it's a lovely way to feel good – (*mention that there'll be other opportunities to shout out in a bit*).

I do like a child who says thank you which is probably why my grandson Zak used to say thank you repeatedly like that when he was little. It's a very sweet and very effective way of getting more of what you want isn't it but it also captures that sense of overwhelming gratitude that fills you right up and just has to come pouring out again, like an overfull cup – thank you, thank you, thank you. It's also a delightful meditative practice to have a silent mantra of gratitude repeating in your mind as you walk in nature.

I wonder what life would be like if we carried around with us all the time a strong sense of the absolute miracle of our being alive – us humans, these strange individual beings that we are - encased in skin, with beating hearts and flowing blood, material beings with the spark of consciousness and individuality, with the ability to reflect and ask questions – if we stayed truly conscious of the miracle of existence all the time, how would we behave I wonder? Would we be blissed out hermits smiling to ourselves in a cave, would be dancing in the streets with one another?

It's perhaps just as well that for most of us this gratitude for being alive is only with us for short moments in time – but in the gratitude meditation earlier on between us we probably covered many of the key areas for human thanksgiving:

Ask people to call out what they were grateful for –

- *The natural world*
- *Love of friends and family*
- *Food and drink*
- *Sensations of touch and taste and smell and sound and sight*
- *Laughter*
- *.....*

Meister Eckhart – the Christian mystic, wrote that if we were only ever to utter one prayer throughout our lives – thank you would suffice. Thank you, he says, is the appropriate response of the created to their creator. We have been given the gift of life itself and this planet earth on which to live and whatever our theological beliefs, it's of value to say thank you.

Saying thank you creates a pause, a gracious moment; it marks a turning point and at that point of turning there is a stillness – just as in the equinox that occurs tomorrow – there is a balanced point where day and night are equal. Such still points give us chance to take stock, to reflect. And that is what happens in agrarian societies after the intense efforts of bringing in the harvest, when everyone is expected to play their part. But after that work is completed there is time to take stock. Farmers take a good long reflective look at their fields after the harvest. They assess the condition of the soil and decide what it needs to enrich it. They check the sturdiness of their fences, walls and hedges. Are there gaps to be filled, places to mend? The harvest itself must be assessed – what has the yield been this year? What is the quality of the crop and is it dry – will it last well? Has it been stored safely and correctly? Then there are future plans to be made. What should be grown here next year or should the field be left fallow in order to replenish itself?

These farming terms and images speak also of our own lives I think. We too need to take stock, to reflect for a while, to assess our achievements thus far and to make plans for the future. We need to be clear about the challenges we face and the resources we have. And rather like the farmers who know the importance of enriching the soil, of giving back to the earth in which they grow their crops and on which their livelihoods ultimately depend, we too have many opportunities to give, in return for all that we have received.

Most of us have our favourite causes that we support but there is also something special I think about a group of people finding a cause they want to support together, as a shared project and that's why I am so pleased that we as a congregation decided that we would make an at least five year commitment to support a child in Swaziland and the village in which she lives. A particular thank you to the Blairs for making all this happen – starting with Iona's trip there last year and with Jim's two visits and Caroline's research into the best charity working in this area.

We are also holding a coffee morning on Friday this week in support of the Macmillan cancer nurses scheme which makes such a difference to the lives of people with cancer. Do come along to the coffee morning and if you can't come I have ways of extracting money from you that you will find quite painless – more details in a bit.

When Meister Eckhardt said that one prayer would suffice – and that prayer is thank you, I am sure he is right. The feeling of gratitude is enough - on one level. But on the practical level, when we assess the state of life on earth - there is much to do, isn't there. And part of feeling grateful is then to think of how to pass our good fortune on to others – creating an on-going cycle of giving and receiving, receiving and giving. Such reciprocity helps make the world go round, it also helps a community such as ours to function well. Various academic studies about healthy church congregations discovered that healthy communities always have an outward focus. Yes they have the problems that most churches face of balancing the financial books and dealing with the leaking roof and the ageing facilities – and these problems have to be faced. But if a congregation cares only about itself it tends to decline. Just as in our individual lives we need to look outwards, to think about others, to have external interests and concerns. There is always too much to do, human life will always be imperfect – but we can and do make a difference and now is always as good a time as any in which to start.

So happy harvest everybody and thank you for your listening and for your generosity in supporting this church. Together I really do think we make a difference. Amen.

Benediction:

Our lives are an on-going process of sowing and reaping, reaping and sowing ~ as we sow and we harvest in the fields of our lives may we never forget that our fields adjoin the fields of others, our lives are connected to other lives, we do not exist in isolation. Grateful for our own lives, may we be people who, joining together, find ways to establish a fair harvest for all peoples of the world, weaving a new tapestry of love and justice here on earth for all to enjoy. And may this be so, amen.