

Generous God ...

... Gratitude for a generous God

A sermon given on the Eighteenth Sunday of Trinity, 16th October 2022 – by the Associate Vicar, the Revd Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster

Exodus 16:13-31: Matthew 6:19-33

One of the most useful things for me about attending 6th form was undertaking my Duke of Edinburgh Awards. I learnt things that you could never gain in a classroom, including how to cook dehydrated meals on a Trangia stove in a gale force wind on a mountain in the Lake District. I think these meals were called 'bean feast', and managing to heat up enough water to eat one of these, after hiking vertically with vertical rain on every side, took the group of six of us everything that we had. The final result, however, was like eating manna from heaven, balm to our cold, exhausted and soggy souls. I don't know if I've got any fellow campers here who resonate with that concept, but manna from heaven is a phrase that was borrowed from today's Old Testament reading, referring to something so needed and so longed for it's as if it came directly from God. Which, of course, is how the manna, the bread, arrived for the Israelites each morning on their long journey through the wilderness.

When we returned from our expedition to the Lake District to flatter Finland, we had a reunion, a Duke of Edinburgh reunion. And we cooked ourselves one of these most delicious bean feasts in recognition of its life-saving delights, only to realise that when eaten in the comfort of somebody's own home, they are revolting. They taste like eating cardboard with spice thrown on it. Our near worship of the 'bean feast' turned to disgust, and I have never been near one since. I don't even know if they still exist.

You see, our theme today is gratitude. Gratitude to a generous God. And gratitude is so often linked to our circumstances. And when we have plenty and plenty of choice, it's easy to start complaining and to ignore the good things that are in front of us. It's also tempting to hoard the good things, to quickly become entitled to what I want or desire, which isn't 'bean feast'. If I go camping now (confession here), I tend to take a car rather than carrying everything with me for three days and many bags full of delicious food. And if possible, I'll camp near a food van with bacon butties and burgers and ice creams and chocolate brownies - you get the idea of how my life has changed.

Now, we don't hear about the Israelites and ice creams, but we do hear about their desire to take more food than they needed, to ignore the instructions and to pop some aside for

later. They struggled to trust God when he says he'll provide more on the 6th day so that they can have a day of rest. And then later in the story, just as we did, they go on to complain about the bread, just as we did about the 'bean feast'. Their bread turns to maggoty worms when they try to take a little bit more than they needed, a gruesome and vivid picture. But that's because this narrative offers us much to learn about the generosity and the provision of God and how he intended our relationship to be with all that he gives us.

God is generous. Every bit of his creation and his redemption speaks of that generosity. Many of us were speaking earlier about the beauty of this time of year and the lights making all of creation dance. The appropriate response is to say thank you and not to focus on our entitlement to more than we need. God's generosity contrasts with our often anxiety about scarcity that arises from our reluctance to trust Him. Just like the Israelites for that Sabbath day, I need to keep working. I need to get more. Like the Israelites, we have a tendency to hoard and that causes others to have less than they need. It becomes competitive, and so the weak lose out to the strong, something we are all only too aware of in these turbulent economic times.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus instructs his disciples not to store up for themselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal, but to store up treasures in heaven. When God provides for us with more than our immediate needs, it's always for the good of others, for the building up of the community, for the opportunity for us to be generous. And generosity isn't about how much you have, but it's an attitude, a trust in God's continued provision, a way of life. I discovered this most powerfully when I was living in Cameroon, in West Africa, and one evening we decided to go and visit one of our Cameroonian colleagues in his home. It wasn't a planned visit, we had been invited as a general thing, and we turned up. And when we arrived, he thanked God delightedly, explaining that this was his birthday. And the fact that we had all arrived meant he could share his birthday celebration more widely and it would be more joyful. He had cooked part of a chicken for his birthday celebration and we were offered some small scraps of bone, the very best part of all that they had. And to this day I am humbled and challenged by that experience. Because, to be honest, if unexpected guests turned up at my door on my birthday, I'd be quite annoyed. And I'd struggle to share the meal I've prepared at all. I certainly wouldn't give them the best thing that I had hoped for for myself on my birthday. Encountering true generosity that stems from the heart, from a literal gratitude to God for every day's need, is life-changing.

I wonder for a moment if you can think about truly generous people that you have encountered, those who share what they have without really knowing how not to, just like my friend in Cameroon, who sense that everything they have is gift and they can identify what they need without hoarding.

- My granny's generosity involved her time and her teapot.
- Steve at the food bank - his generosity involves physical, hard work and wise compassion.
- Fiona the company director - her generosity involves taking seriously the fair wages and conditions for all her staff.
- Philip the volunteer at Hedgehog Sanctuary - his generosity involves driving around the countryside protecting an endangered species.
- The Minster - this place here, runs almost entirely on the generosity of countless people who give away their time, talents and tithes. Some in response to their faith, others in support of the heritage and community life.

Generosity is found in people of all faiths and none and is always liberating and life-enhancing. True generosity and understanding that God gives us all we need, and the rest, His gift to be generous with can be world-changing.

And if you are here this morning or watching online, and you seek to be a follower of Jesus, somebody who has responded to the grace of God and recognises the gift of his Son, shows the limitless and costly extent of his generosity, then we are those who, as we learn to trust God, allow that generosity to reflect in our lives. As we catch a vision for his kingdom, we realise more and more the transformative power of our generosity, of redressing the balance so that there is enough of God's abundance for all people. When we stop hoarding the manna from heaven, we're free to travel light. I could never have climbed the mountain with the three carrier bags of rich and sumptuous food that I like to take with me now. The 'bean feast' was what I needed.

And over the next few weeks here at the Minster, we will be considering the ways in which we can be generous with our money, our time and our lives. There will be a chance to review our giving to the church, to explore joyfully, how we can respond to the needs of the Minster community and beyond. There will be some literature, as ever, to tell you the most efficient way to do this, because thankfully, we are no longer having to pick bread from the floor, and 'direct debit' is a marvellous thing, but more soon.

But if I may, I wish to leave you with a challenge that I have taken into all the primary schools when I've been taking collective worship this week. When I went to the first

school, I asked them how many conkers they thought I had and we counted them. Now, I've given a few away since then, so I'm not sure how many are in here and I'm not going to count them because it took quite a long time. But there's about 190 to give you a clue. And if I keep these conkers that Ben and Jonathan and probably Nell and the family collected in this box, and I put a lid on it and I hand it to Sue after the service and say, "Sue, here's your conker's back" I imagine that Sue will probably prompt it in the garage and forget about it. And when Jonathan and Sue eventually move house, they will probably find this box, either containing some rather smelly slime because the damp has got in and they've all gone rotten, or they will just be little shrivel-up pea-like, things that are no use to anybody.

But actually in this box are approximately 190 potential horse chestnut trees. This box contains the incredible potential to change landscapes; to provide shelter; to help improve the environment; to bring life. And I think it is a truly wonderful example of what we are thinking about in this season of generous giving. These conkers are like our blessings, our treasures, all that we have been given from God. If we're generous, if we share what we have, if we give away the excess, the possibilities of what could happen are endless: the growth of the church; the impact of a charity; the transformation of an individual's life.

So this morning, let us count our blessings, thank our generous God, and with open hands, let us be a blessing to others, offering our manna from heaven to all those who need it .

Reading Texts

Exodus 16:13-31

¹³ In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. ¹⁶ This is what the Lord has commanded: "Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.' " ¹⁷ The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. ¹⁸ But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. ¹⁹ And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." ²⁰ But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. ²¹ Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted. ²² On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, ²³ he said to them, "This is what the Lord has commanded: "Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.' " ²⁴ So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. ²⁵ Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. ²⁶ Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none." ²⁷ On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. ²⁸ The Lord said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? ²⁹ See! The Lord has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day." ³⁰ So the people rested on the seventh day. ³¹ The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

Matthew 6:19-33

¹⁹ "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ²² "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if

your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; ²³ but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! ²⁴ "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. ²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.