

Gratitude as a way of life ...

... leads to full humanity

A sermon given on the First Sunday of Lent, 9th March 2025, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

'How can I be a better person?'

That sounds like a good question for us to consider at the beginning of Lent - that season in the church's year when we're encouraged to be a bit introspective, to reflect upon the shape and direction of our lives, the goals we are pursuing and the means we're using to pursue them. It's a good question whether you're a Christian or not - 'How can I be a better person? What will help me to be more human?' For the Christian, the answer is often bound up with Jesus: 'Look at Jesus,' we say, 'Consider his life. Look at the temptations he resisted, and we might get a sense of how our lives might be better.' The problem is, most of us aren't very confident about comparing ourselves to Jesus - 'Oh, he's the Son of God,' we say, 'I could never be like him.' So if we're not careful, we quietly give up on trying to be a better person, and we accommodate ourselves to the idea of just being slightly disappointing. Instead of longing to be a better person, I just get complacent about being a slightly disappointing person because I can't face allowing myself to be inspired by Jesus. The gap between my life and his seems too great. So my gambit at the start of this Lent is to say, 'Consider Harvest Festival as a way of life.' The secret to becoming a better person is to live 'Harvest Festival' day by day.

Now, that may sound like a very odd thing to say, especially at the beginning of March, but I wonder whether you noticed that our first reading today from Deuteronomy 26 was all about the Israelite Harvest Festival, when people came to the temple and offered the first crops in thanksgiving - not only for the harvest, but for the gift of the land itself and also for the gift of God's rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt. It's worth pondering why is one of our readings for the beginning of Lent all about this ancient Israeli celebration of Harvest Festival and I think it's because it tells us how we can be better people by being more thankful.

Let me explain what I mean.

I once had a colleague whose house had a little cottage annex, and they used to let out this annex as a holiday cottage and in the garden of the annex there was a plum tree. One September, there were some people in the cottage just as the plum tree was producing hundreds of plums. It was a bumper crop, and the plums were simply dropping off the tree. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door of my friend's house and it was the people staying in the cottage who said, "We see the plums are falling off the plum tree, and we thought we'd like to make some plum jam. The only problem is the saucepans in the kitchen aren't very big. So we wondered whether you might have a bigger pan we could borrow to make the jam in." My friend said, "Yes, I think we've got a jam pan somewhere. Here you go." And off the holiday makers went. But a bit later there was another knock at the door, and the people from the annex were there again saying, "Awfully sorry, but we've run out of sugar. There are so many plums that used up all our sugar, so can we borrow some?" So my friend looked in the cupboards and handed over a couple of bags of sugar. Then it all went quiet for a bit until later that evening when there was another knock at the door and the

holiday makers were there again saying, "So we've made the jam and it looks lovely, but we haven't got any jam jars." So my friend went into the garage, dug out a box of empty jam jars and handed them over. Then he didn't see any more of these folk until the end of their holiday. When he looked out of the window to see them loading up the boot of their car with dozens of jars of plum jam. When they were all loaded up, they came and to the door and said, "We thought you might like to have a jar of this lovely jam that we've made." My friend said, "Oh, thank you very much." Then they drove off laden with their cargo of jam. At that point, my friend paused and thought, "Hold on a moment. I've just provided the plums, the sugar. I've provided the pan to make it in and the stove to boil it on. I've even provided it the jars to put it in, but I'm the one saying 'thank you' to them. Something not quite right here!"

Now, think of that story as a parable. God has made a universe in which we find ourselves on a planet which is incredibly fruitful: it's bursting with life; it's beautiful and rich; and he's given it to us. He's given us the gift of life and handed the world over to us to see what we can do with it, and we've been incredibly creative. We've made pancakes and Jaffer Cakes, stocks and shares and Birkenstocks, iPhone and AI, everything from hip hop to hip replacements - and we've done it all with the raw materials we've been provided with and with the health and intelligence we've been blessed with. As a species, we often seem to be really quite pleased with ourselves because of all that we've achieved - and at Harvest Festival, we make a great song and dance about saying 'thank you' to God with a loaf of bread and a turnip! Sometimes it seems that things aren't quite right somehow.

The answer to the question, 'How can I be a better person?' is by learning to say 'thank you.' - not just as a form of words when someone has done you a favour, but 'thank you' as a way of life. Because 'thank you' recognises that the heartbeat of the universe is the heartbeat of grace. 'Thank you' reminds us that we are not self-made and self-sufficient, but that we are dependent upon God's generosity in the end for everything. 'Thank you' reminds us that we live in relationship with other people and with God, and that relationships work best when there is humility and grace - 'thank you' expresses something of that. 'Thank you' makes us better people because a life shaped by 'thank you' is a life shaped by awareness of generosity. Those who say 'thank you' will be unconsciously cultivating a habit of generosity themselves. You will be a better person when you learn to be more generous: generous in your judgments of others; generous with your time and attention; generous in your relationships; generous with your money and resources.

In the 40 days in the wilderness Jesus was being tested to see what it meant to be the Son of God. Was it about power or about fixing problems or about offering certainty? Or was it rather about trust and about staying focused on God and about discerning what is truly satisfying. In the same way, you and I are being tested all our lives long about what it means to be truly human. Does it mean to seek power for ourselves? To be able to fix every problem that comes our way, to seek certainty? Or does being truly human mean finding that we have to build habits of gratitude; in learning to say 'thank you' to God and to each other - and in doing that, we're building a capacity for generosity, for trust, and for sharing that will open up for us the pathway to a full and a rich humanity.

I want to suggest this morning that 'thank you' is for life, not just for harvest, and I wonder what shape 'thank you' takes in your life.

Reading Text

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

¹ When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³ You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.' ⁴ When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, ⁵ you shall make this response before the Lord your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶ When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, ⁷ we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸ The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹ and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.' You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. ¹¹ Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Luke 4:1-13

¹ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' ⁴ Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' ⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸ Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' ⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", ¹¹ and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' ¹² Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.