

1st October 2017 Harvest Thanksgiving

Exodus 17.1-7

I opened my sock drawer the other day and realised I was running out of socks. I was left with those older pairs of well worn, threadbare and in places holey socks. I don't know about you but my socks seem to wear out either at the heel or by the big toe. All the remaining pairs of socks left in my sock drawer had holes in all those places.

I started to grumble. Why haven't I got any decent socks to wear. My grumbling got worse when I went downstairs to find my son wearing a pair of my good socks. 'Oi give them back!'. 'Finders keepers' came the reply.

I said to myself I need to go out and buy some more socks.

Then I read an article about our disposable and consumeristic society with all its repercussions for how we treat the environment and indeed other people. The writer grumbled at how disposability can seep into aspects of society. We expect to discard last year's gadget and replace it with this year's model. Do we end up

tempted to think of people and relationships and values and faith as disposable?

And the writer used the example of socks. He said sometimes I think it's all because we stopped darning our socks. When he was growing up he was still in a country where people darned their socks. He even learnt to do it in school himself. Then suddenly one day it was over. Socks with holes in them were thrown out. No one bothered to repair them anymore. He nostalgically remembered a time when we didn't throw everything away, whether it was woollen socks or human beings.

I was never taught by my parents how to darn socks. But I did find a good pair to wear today you'll be pleased to know.

It is easy to grumble and be nostalgic for an age and values that were probably not as good as our memory tricks us into believing they were.

This month in our sermon themes we are looking at God's Provision. The gifts and care of God for us and our world. Today, Harvest thanksgiving, we come to give thanks for all good gifts around us. But it is often easier to grumble

than to give thanks. The default setting on most British people seems to be grumble before thankfulness. Maybe it's the weather?

We have a lot in common with the ancient Israelites. We will be following the story of Moses in our Bible readings this month, and that evocative story of how he led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. It is a metaphorical story for so much of human life.

Our passage today in Exodus 17 has the Israelites grumbling that they have no water in the desert. God has brought them out of slavery but now they get worried because they don't trust that God is going to provide for their needs in the desert, so they start grumbling and having a go at Moses.

Moses says 'why are you quarrelling with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?' He goes off on one and passes on their complaints to God who doesn't get angry or grumbles about this lot of ungrateful people. Instead, God provides water from the rock at Horeb. But the story is marked down as a time when the Israelites quarrelled and tested God and doubted whether 'The Lord was among us or not?'

It is of course one of those big questions of our day 'Is the Lord among us or not'. At Harvest thanksgiving who are we giving thanks to? Farmers, supermarkets (so long as they don't drop our chickens on the floor) or God the creator and sustainer of all that we have and are?

I was sat in a pub in Stroud the other week when a woman came up to me whose grandmother's funeral I had taken a few months before. I asked how her mother was doing. Her mother had been upset at the loss of her mother and she struggled with having a religious funeral. Her mother had a deep Christian faith which her daughter had been sceptical about and thought Christianity was for people who didn't think, were bigoted and hypocritical and she basically she had rejected it many years ago. She had always insisted that when it came to her funeral she wanted a non-religious one stripped of all the wishful thinking and empty hope of a Christian one.

Anyway, her daughter was stood in front of me and I asked how her mother had coped with the funeral. She said her mother's changed. She found the Christian funeral of real comfort and hope and she senses now that perhaps there is Someone out there, looking after us,

cares about us, loves us. She wants to rethink this Christianity.

I said we're starting an Alpha Course soon why don't you suggest she comes along to it to explore those issues. I got a text from her mother a few days ago saying she's thinking about coming.

Most of the time, most of us are unaware of any greater reality behind things. We don't ask 'Is the Lord among us?' We are immersed in the mundane, preoccupied with the outward world. The interior or spiritual dimension remains hidden; God seems absent. Yet a mystic loiters within each of us, waiting to be noticed and nurtured.

We all have moments when we glimpse something beyond the purely material world, when we bump into God. But we'd don't necessarily think of them as religious or spiritual experiences. I'm talking about those ordinary sacred moments that may be joyful, sad, inspirational, melancholic, awesome.

Receiving an undeserved smile from a child

Gazing at the milky way on a dark night far from city lights

Holding the hand of a dying loved one.

Gazing at a town cleansed by a recent fall of snow

Weeping over a broken relationship

Sipping a cold beer on summer's day with nothing to do

Feeling inspired by a new project or how things have come together 'miraculously'.

Standing at an open grave.ⁱ

Life is packed with God-ness, but mostly we walk by on the other side, anxious about a meeting, hurrying to catch a bus, wondering what we will do tonight, dreaming about the weekend, falling asleep on the inside.

And the world is an ambiguous place, so sometimes we miss the God experience because we are so aware of the darkness, suffering and the evil we see or hear about. I can fully understand why people wonder 'Is the Lord among us?'

For me: I just think it makes more sense of the world that the Lord is among us. Personally I wouldn't know where to turn if the Lord was not among us.

At its best, religion and faith can help us not to be overwhelmed by the darkness, and even to believe that we can make some small contribution to eliminating it and holding on to hope in those dark times.

Victor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor spent three years in a concentration camp, living under the shadow of the gas chamber. He concluded that even in that absurd, painful and dehumanised situation, life has potential meaning and that therefore even suffering is meaningful. But he argued that human beings are ‘deciding beings’; that we may not be able to determine what happens to us, but we can decide how to react to what happens to us. Looking back on his dark days of his imprisonment, he wrote:

‘We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way’ⁱⁱ

Frankl discovered that the only way for the prisoner’s humanity to survive was to relocate the main meaning of their lives to some transcendent reference point, something beyond this life and even this world. Something suffering can’t take from you.

Finding meaning in life, finding someone to give thanks too, someone to pray too, someone to be angry to, someone to say sorry to, is I would argue, something that makes sense of life and answers the question why there is something and not nothing.

In this Biblical story the Israelites in the desert need water. It is a basic need for survival. Yet once our material needs are satisfied we have a need for love and meaning. Abraham Maslow famously expressed this in his hierarchy of needs. After our physical and safety needs were met, we had a need for love and belonging and esteem – but for a full and fulfilling life we needed a sense of meaning, values, beliefs, something that transcends ourselves.

As come to celebrate Harvest today – we give thanks for food and water and shelter and all those important

physical needs. All the good gifts around. But as we will look at in further weeks there is a need for more. Material stuff doesn't ultimately satisfy. Of course, we need money – and I'm sure we would all like a bit more money. But those who have money usually just want more of it. It may buy you a better house and better medical care but it may not guarantee you a better life or make you a better person.

Jesus would say man cannot live on bread alone – we also need our souls feeding. This is what the Israelites in the desert would discover. They were being tested: did they see life purely from a materialistic outlook – we want just bread and water. God did not get angry with them for wanting those things, they were important and necessary. But the heart of this dilemma is their lack of trust and relationship with God who had brought them out of slavery and drudgery under Pharaoh, to a new life of freedom and faith.

But all they could do was to be fixated on their immediate needs and grumble.

Our baptism of Henry reminds us of the astonishing Christian claim that we are unconditionally loved and precious in God's sight before we can even accept or

reject God. God doesn't give up on us. Like socks with holes in them... He doesn't throw it all away and start again. We are not disposable in God's sight.

Baptism reminds us that we are of high worth and deep significance in the heart of God.

Today we come to give thanks for the gift of life, for Henry, for Isaac, for each one of us. We come to give thanks that we are loved. We come to give thanks for the provision for our lives. We will all grumble at times. Whether its because we have holes in our socks or something less trivial. But we also have much to give thanks for.

I was moved once when I heard an older person, looking back on the years say 'what a wonderful life I've had. I only wish I'd realized it sooner'.

May we have the attitude of gratitude and trust God's provision for the future.

ⁱ D Tomlinson, *How to be a Bad Christian*, Hodder, 2012

ⁱⁱ V Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Simon and Schuster 1984