**30th September 2018**

**Genesis 1.27-2.3; 2 Cor 9.6-11**

This is a thanksgiving – we are thankful for the harvest we have and the harvest that we can share. I wonder if you say thanks in your household for what God has given you? A thankful heart is an open heart.

There is this atheist swimming in the ocean. All of the sudden he sees this shark in the water, so he starts swimming towards his boat.

As he looks back he sees the shark turn and head towards him. His boat is a way off and he starts swimming like crazy. He's scared to death, and as he turns to see the jaws of the great white beast open revealing its teeth in a horrific splendour, the atheist screams, "Oh God! Save me!"

In an instant time is frozen and a bright light shines down from above. The man is motionless in the water when he hears the voice of God say, "You are an atheist. Why do you call upon me when you do not believe in me?"

Aghast with confusion and knowing he can't lie the man replies, "Well, that's true I don't believe in you, but how about the shark? Can you make the shark believe in you?"

The Lord replies, "As you wish," and the light retracted back into the heavens and the man could feel the water begin to move once again.

As the atheist looks back he can see the jaws of the shark start to close down on him, when all of sudden the shark stops and pulls back.

Shocked, the man looks at the shark as the huge beast closes its eyes and bows its head and says,

‘For what I am about to receive may the Lord make me truly thankful’

A Sunday School Teacher asked one of her children, "Now, Johnny, tell me frankly do you say prayers before eating?"

"No miss," Little Johnny replies, "I don't have to, my mom is a good cook!"

We sometimes just dive into food in our house but more often than not we try to stop and give thanks. When the children were small we sometimes used a cube, which had various graces written on it. Another grace we used was from South America and says, ‘O God for those who have hunger give bread and for those who have bread give a hunger for justice’. It’s a prayer of thankfulness and petition – a prayer for open heartedness and compassion.

From the early years in the bible, the people of God were to give some of their harvest away – a gift to God and to the poor – those whose harvest hadn’t been good. (e.g. Deut 24.19) The intention was that if you have been blessed, go and be a blessing for those who hadn’t. The other principle was that all of life was a gift – a gift from God. So be open handed about the gifts you have – don’t grasp at them – live graciously and generously.

The story of creation in Genesis tells how God has made us in His image, a simple fact that many today dispute. Is there a God? Do we have any purpose or meaning as humanity? Questions like this are tackled in the Alpha Course and I once again commend that to you and encourage you to invite those you know who God is nudging to confront such issues.

Genesis also says we are stewards of all God’s good gifts in creation.

*The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.’ Gen 2.15*

The Hebrew word for ‘take care’ has a sense of guarding and keeping it – like protecting something from intruders or from being stolen.

The rest of the Bible then goes on to illustrate how we have misused this freedom for our own ends, rejecting this duty and rejecting the God who created us and lavished us with all good gifts. For Christians the advent of Jesus is God’s rescue plan to start the process of restoring us in relationship to God and to our environment. But we have a long way to go.

Our Christian Aid exhibition has illustrated the challenges to the people of Bolivia from climate change and how to help them find a more sustainable way of life. Climate change is among the greatest issues facing humankind today. It affects the world’s poorest people first, and it hits them hardest. These communities are least equipped to withstand floods, drought and extreme weather patterns and in turn this leads to more hunger, fear and insecurity.

The amazon rainforest truly is the lungs of the world, providing us all with the oxygen that we need to survive – so we have more than a stake in this. But the problem of course is that climate change is incremental, so people don’t think there is a crisis and don’t want to do anything about it. Governments of the world all look to short term fixes that will make them popular and re- electable, not long-term answers that may be unpopular in the present.

But the facts are alarming: 2017 was the costliest year on record for severe weather and climate events. Of the 18 warmest years ever recorded, 17 have occurred since 2001.

Experts concur that patterns of extreme weather are evidence of dangerous global warming, which 97 percent of climate scientists now agree is a man-made phenomenon. Some experts are concerned about Earth passing one or more ‘tipping points’ – abrupt, perhaps irreversible changes that tip our climate into a new state.” The predictions are frightening: Old Testament-style flooding of countries, the elimination of coral reefs and animal species, people displaced from their homes due to drought and loss of life on a catastrophic scale.[[1]](#endnote-1)

It’s uncomfortable and even surprising to some of us to consider that our way of living is causing these devastating weather events around the world, but that’s what much of the science shows us.

For the church, Christians ever since the Reformation have tended to “reduce salvation” to a focus on individuals, “as opposed to a story of the Church as the body of Christ being united to one another...and this wonderful harmony with nature that is promised in the new heaven and the new earth.

So, because we’ve reduced the gospel to this gospel of individual salvation we don’t get the importance of creation. And so, we have a sense that creation is just there for our exploitation.

God is not simply going to trash creation at the end, he’s going to renew it, and so we can’t trash creation. But an equally important reason is that we as Christians believe one of the most important things we are called to do is to love our neighbour. And you can’t love your neighbour if you continue living a lifestyle that is causing climate change, causing greater floods, causing higher waters in the Pacific, causing forest fires and incredible temperatures in the Indian subcontinent.

We as a church have just set up an eco-group to tackle some of these issues and how the church can start to get its act together.

What might have got lost in the last church meeting, because we were agonizing about money is that we have made a formal commitment to lessening the Tab’s impact on the earth and its people

Our Eco group proposal was that we make a formal commitment to become a more sustainable church, encouraging Christian commitment to nurture creation and God’s people. This will include: Working towards Eco-Church accreditation, drawing up an eco-policy (including targets for reduced carbon footprint), having an ‘energy champion’, Eco-tips in our church communications, widening the scope of our Traidcraft stall, youth and children’s work on green issues and reinvigorating our Fair-Trade status. We have already switched energy suppliers to more green renewable sources.

***Being thankful for God’s good gifts means being good stewards of them.***

Stewardship of our money of course was another topic at our recent church meeting. What we do with our money has always been an issue for discipleship.

2000 years ago, Jesus said **13**‘*No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money*.’ Luke 16.13

He encouraged generosity: ‘*Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*’ Luke 6.38.

Interestingly Jesus never said how much you should give away, but he did expect his followers to be generous. It was more a question of ‘when you give., not if you give… (Matthew 6.2). Devout Jews of his day would automatically give a tenth of their income away as their tithe and on top of that give alms – voluntary gifts.

Giving is part of what it means to be a Christian. Because we are all debtors to God – we give out of gracious thanks for all we have been given. Martin Luther the great reformer said that three conversions take place when you become a Christian and your eyes and heart are open to the grace of God. There is the conversion of the mind, the conversion of the heart and the conversion of the wallet. Before we are converted we tend to think that our money is our own and that we have the right to do with it whatever we like. When we are converted we realise that everything we have belongs to God, and that it is he who is sharing it with us.

Sometimes people say ‘I’ve worked hard for the money I’ve got. This may be true, but where did the energy, ability and gifts come from? When we come to Christ we should realise that rather than being the owners of our money, we are the managers; the stewards of God’s gifts to us.

I realised that money had a pull on my life and a pull away from the joy of contentment in God when I was obsessing over it when I found myself unemployed and one of Maggie Thatcher’s three million dole queue in the 1980’s. I grasped what St. Paul talks about in being content with what we have, whether that’s a lot or little and finding joy in God’s gifts to us (Philippians 4.10-20). I started then to pledge to give a tenth away of my money – it is I believe a good spiritual principle to tithe whatever we receive. (Deut 12.1-14; 2 Chronicles 31.2-8; Nehemiah 10.37-39; 2 Cor 9.6-15). God has blessed us, but not just for ourselves but to be a blessing. Giving money away is a great antidote to possessiveness and materialism. It was hard when I was unemployed and trying to live on £30 a week. I remember those days of spreading jam on my toast and then scraping it off again and putting it back in the jar in order to be frugal.

My priority was to honour God first, not to think of my own needs first. If we start with our own needs first, we will never have enough money. We always want more, and God gets the loose change, if at all. I don’t want money being my God. (Matthew 6.19-21, 24). I put a tenth aside immediately to give away before I get caught up with the demands of life: paying a mortgage, funding children, cars, holidays, lifestyles. Believe me it is a liberating spiritual principle because you can feel less guilty about enjoying the 90% left. The apostle Paul says God loves a cheerful giver and urges us not to give reluctantly or under compulsion. It shouldn’t be out of stern duty or necessity but proportionately, generously and cheerfully.

The church meeting a couple of weeks ago heard that **the church’s income has basically stayed the same for the last seven years** whilst costs, not unexpectedly, have risen. We are at the point where ***unless offerings increase we will have to make cuts in what we do as a church*** and the life and vitality of the church will consequently be affected.

This comes at a time when we are currently working to finish the refurbishment of the upper hall, kitchen and upper floors of the old Parsonage, finally bringing to an end over 15 years of building projects to transform and update our ailing premises. The completion of this work offers new opportunity and potential to the church and local community. But again, it needs good stewardship of our facilities. The church meeting recognised this by **stepping out in faith to seek the appointment of a site administrator** who will ensure the premises are safe, well maintained, organised and promoted. On top of our current expenditure this role will cost the church at least £5K which, at the moment, we do not have. It was felt that unless such an individual was in place we would miss a crucial moment to take the church forward.

Our extended premises and increased outreach now require considerable management and compliance with legislation and regulations for community buildings, making it more difficult for us to rely on volunteer labour for certain roles. It is pointless to refurbish our premises and then fail to manage them and run them to their potential. Unless our site administration is properly managed, more and more of our energy and time will be consumed in maintenance and not mission and ministry.

This is therefore a **crucial time for the future of the Tab**. There are fantastic workers and volunteers for the church who give of their time and talents and without which we couldn’t function. Many will be liberated to do fresh work for the Lord if the burden of maintaining our buildings is taken off them by a site administrator.

We have all worked hard to make this a vibrant church for all ages with a heart to serve the local community. Not a week goes by when I am not made aware of how we have helped the poorest of the poor, shared faith with those who despair and welcomed all in the grace of Jesus. I hope you will give time to our Vision 2030 process for the type of church you hope we will be in the future.

However, churches don’t run on thin air: they need money and our giving is not in step with the need to support God’s work in this place. So, I ask you to prayerfully reconsider what support you can give to this church and tis important work in this town.

I am grateful for many who have already increased their giving. I recall an infamous church treasurer who wanted the church members to increase their giving. He said, ‘I’ve upped mine: Up Yours!’. Not quite the message we want to covey.

We are called to be good stewards by our creator of all the good gifts we have. The gift of our time, our money, our gifts, and the wonderful world we live in and are called to take care of. We give thanks for the Harvest and the one who sends it and we pray for God’s wisdom and generosity to abound in every good work.

1. Christainty Magazine, Sept 2018 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)