

'A matter of the heart's instructions'

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

God cares for the earth and makes it fruitful. He crowns the year with his good gifts. – Ps.65,9.11

Collect:

Almighty God, we offer you hearty thanks for your goodness and care in giving to us the fruits of the earth in their seasons. Give us grace to use them rightly, to your glory, for the relief of those in need, and our own well-being; through Jesus Christ the living Bread, who came down from heaven and gives life to the world, and who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

All things praise Thee

- 1 All things praise Thee, Lord most high,
heaven and earth and sea and sky,
all were for Thy glory made,
that Thy greatness, thus displayed,
should all worship bring to Thee;
all things praise Thee: Lord, may we.
- 2 All things praise Thee: night to night
sings in silent hymns of light;
all things praise Thee: day to day
chants Thy power in burning ray;
time and space are praising Thee;
all things praise Thee: Lord, may we.
- 3 All things praise Thee, high and low,
rain and dew, and seven-hued bow,
crimson sunset, fleecy cloud,

rippling stream, and tempest loud,
summer, winter – all to Thee
glory render: Lord, may we.

- 4 All things praise Thee, heaven's high
shrine
rings with melody divine;
lowly bending at Thy feet,
seraph and archangel meet;
this their highest bliss, to be
ever praising: Lord, may we.
- 5 All things praise Thee, gracious Lord,
great Creator, powerful Word,
omnipresent Spirit, now
at Thy feet we humbly bow,
lift our hearts in praise to Thee;
all things praise Thee: Lord, may we.

Words by George William Conder

Reading: **Deut.8,1-10** and **Jn.6,24-35**

Sermon:

Dear friends

Let's talk about hands. Some are aesthetically pleasing, some are less so; some are small and some are big; some are beautifully proportioned and some not so much. Differences of this kind may matter on some level, but you will agree that what is ultimately important about hands, really, is whether they do what they are supposed to do (big or small or whatever). When we ask, however, what hands are supposed to do, we find that soon our focus shifts from the hand as such, its look and appearance and dexterity, to the heart, because we realise what hands are supposed to do is to carry out the instructions coming from a good, upright, loving heart. So the question: "What do my hands look like?", matters far less than the question: "Are they kind hands, the sort of hands they are supposed to be?"

The point I want to make in connection with harvest and thanksgiving has to do with this issue of what a thing is meant for and is supposed to do, in distinction from its appearance and uses that are forgetful of its true meaning.

In the passage we read from Deut.8 God's people are called to consider what all they have received at the hands of God is supposed to do, what it is meant for.

For the use of all that they have received, that is its purpose, is not fully realised in the immediate benefit the people derive from it for themselves or in the uses they put it to when these are self-centred and self-glorifying. Because what they are supposed to do, what they are meant for, is to prompt the heart to attend to that which will enable it to be alive – in the way the Bible understands this: alive to God and one's neighbour in love; in other words, to that which will enable the heart to give the sort of instructions to the person that are good, upright, generous, loving, and righteous. And what enables it in this way is the word of God – hence the call to attend to it and let God's gifts, whatever they are in size and appearance, prompt and encourage one to do so. *".. to teach you that man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."*

"When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you."

Have you ever heard such a thing?! And if you have, did you listen? I rather hope, of course, that you have. I hope this is not like foreign music to your ears. Yes, would that every day, and this day in particular, we saw what we have been given – the harvests, the food that we eat and the means we have to secure it, the fruitfulness of people's efforts on and off the fields, the ability to produce and often abundantly so – and let it prompt us to praise God and seek and search out his word so that we may do it (= that we may not just 'have' but may *live*)!

Yet, I rather think that we may know too much (still) in our selves of this attitude which God is here warning his people about – the attitude of mistaking having much with living: of considering the end of what God gives us to be of course whatever immediate benefit it yields for us, the right use of it to be a matter of how we like it for ourselves, in line with instructions proceeding from a heart that is ruled by greed, fear of missing out or love of money.

This concern is illustrated quite straightforwardly in the parable Jesus tells (Lk.12,13-21) of the rich farmer whose fields (ground) yielded an abundant harvest, too big as it turned out for him to store it

all. So he asked himself what he should do. (This bit is about the heart's instruction regarding the question what to do!) He decided to expand his storage facilities so that he would be able to use all of it in the pursuit of his own personal welfare and wellbeing: *"And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"* But that very night God recalled that farmer's life, saying, *'You fool, ... who now will get what you have prepared for yourself?'* The heart's instructions that he had followed were all wrong. Jesus finished this parable with the words: *"This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God."*

This sounds the same note made also in Deut.8, for this is how the passage we read goes on – with a warning to his people not to forget "the LORD your God" or fail to listen to his word, because doing so would make their hearts proud, effecting what kind of instructions would proceed from it. *"You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today. If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed."* (8,17-19)

Dear friends, we rejoice at the plenty of our harvests and are grateful for all the ways in which our needs are supplied. And we realise also the temptation, inclination, to forget the Lord our God and what his gifts are meant for, to hold it all without regard to his word. (In this context: Can we fail to notice the deafening silence in regard to God and his word in the conversations about abundance and want, environmental issues and social justice?)

The heart is forgetful, it wants to instruct as it pleases. But what all harvests are meant for is to be received as the means for us to be rich towards God through carrying out cheerfully and without worrying his word/will – the instructions proceeding from hearts that are loving, compassionate, generous, giving, pure (hearts at peace because on friendly terms with God!).

This, as Jesus points out, is not in the gift of the world's abundance and the satisfaction one derives from it, but in the gift of what he calls 'the bread of life' for those who receive it.

"Then they asked him, 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.' So they asked him, 'What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: "He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

Jesus said to them, 'Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' 'Sir', they said, 'always give us this bread.' Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'

AMEN

Lord God, you have supplied us with your good gifts – a token of your generous love; you have blessed the work of many hands in many places and have let their labours be fruitful; you have caused the earth to yield its fruit, to provide us with plenty of food and fill our hearts with joy. We thank you and we praise you, the giver of every good gift.

Let not our heart grow proud over the abundance of your gifts, but give us a hunger for your bread from heaven, even Jesus Christ in his atoning sacrifice for our sins, and that we may eat and believe,

so that our heart may instruct us to praise you, use what you give us wisely and share willingly and cheerfully our plenty with others. Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [what concerns we have on our heart we pour out before God and seek in thanksgiving the gifts of His blessings;]
we pray for God’s blessing on our farmers, those involved in the production and distribution of food, charitable organisations like the Foodbank etc.; we seek for light into the darkness of hunger and poverty, for humbleness to recognise our calling to serve;
we ask to discern His judgments and for a spirit of understanding and repentance, for mercy and an end to the spiritual ignorance whereby we fail to reject and abhor sin and wickedness;
we plead for the lost, the broken, the lonely, the abandoned, the persecuted, the suffering...;
we think of the victims and the ongoing trouble of the pandemic in our country and around the world and pray for those who care for the ill and for those tasked with keeping the people safe and for faith and courage...;
we pray for the authorities and those in leadership, for our communities;
we thank God for His guiding and keeping, for all the ways in which we discern his helping hand;
we pray:]

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Now may the peace of God which passes all our understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN
