

Sunday 1 October 2006 Sermon - King's Centre Christian Church, Sheffield, UK

HARVEST SUNDAY – Thankfulness, and God's Heart for the Poor

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Intro

We're taking a break from directly speaking in depth about the covenant series today, to acknowledge our celebration of harvest together, and give thanks for all that we have. Taking time to say thanks for the things we take for granted. Even so, you should by now not be surprised to hear that covenant does actually have a considerable bearing on what I'm going to say.

Congregation read out some facts about the global poverty & the Quechua people in Bolivia

How do we respond to these rather shocking and sobering facts? As the people of God – his chosen means of bringing blessing to all nations (that's what we are as covenant people)..... How should we respond to the reality of poverty and inequality on our planet?

And the really tough issue – for me and I suspect for many of us – as relatively wealthy, healthy, comfortable and decently educated people, living in the wealthy UK..... how can we find the balance between all of the good and nice things, possessions etc which we enjoy in life, and our responsibility to the poor and venerable in the world to which God calls us to be involved?

Today, as we celebrate our modern-day harvest service we are focussing on being thankful for all that we have in life, and all the good gifts and provision which God gives us.

- The last thing I want to do is stop you from being thankful – genuinely!
- But at the same time, the last thing I want to do is leave you feeling **that that is all there is to it**. The attitude that we must be thankful, and then enjoy what we have, and nothing else needs to change.

Be Thankful

There is a scriptural 'command' and imperative, given on various occasions throughout the NT (and the OT) – and its something which is quite easy to overlook. Its two words, which pass quickly as we read other passages, but which mean a great deal to God, and should do to us too!

“Be Thankful”

- Examples:
 - Jesus
 - Gave thanks regularly – eg. for the food at the feeding of 5000
 - Colossians 2:6-8
 - So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.
 - Col 3:15
 - Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.
 - Col 4:2
 - “Further Instructions” at end of letter - Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.
 - Hew 12:28
 - Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

It is really important and powerful to cultivate a culture of thankfulness towards God. Yet, its also an easy thing to overlook at times when we feel under pressure, or burdened.

Lets be realistic – **most of us are doing alright aren't we?** Certainly, there are issues in life, major challenges, major hurts and hurdles. But we have food on the table, a roof over our heads, friends or family around us, the love of another person, a well-paid job (even if it isn't perhaps your dream job) and so the list goes on.

And **we want to be spiritually thankful**..... we have a sure and certain hope! We have a saviour. We have a covenant partner heavenly God who is battling on our side! We have the promise of eternal life, and eternal healing.

Nick Example – For me, being thankful as a state of mind, as part of my Christian walk has **revolutionised the way I relate to God**. It's a discipline – to keep thanking God for everyday things, everyday provision, as well as the big stuff like having children etc. For me, I usually try to begin any prayer with thankfulness, before I leap into laying out my problems, or asking God for help in something.

That's why its great to see today's display of 'good things' in life for which we are thankful. PRAISE GOD! None of us here produce our own food these days, so our modern response needs to be thankfulness for God's material provision in many other ways. **Its good to recognise that we live in a highly privileged society** – compared to the bare-bones existence of the Quechua people in Boliva. Its important and good to recognise and thank God for all of the good things around us.

The niggling challenge

But – don't you also sometimes **find it hard to reconcile** our bounteous and safe existence with that of our fellow people in two-thirds of the world? Don't you sometimes, or often, **feel a niggling uneasiness in your heart at our lifestyle**, when you remember how the majority of the rest of the world still live?

I think the reason may be this:

Some of what we think **God gives us**, I think **we actually take**

- i. **at the expense** of what **other people don't have**.
- ii. I'm not convinced that **all of the good things we enjoy** are straight gifts from God to us – I feel they are **taken by us**, which stops there being enough for everybody else
- iii. Otherwise, God would also have given the Bolivians an iPod, a car, central heating, £25k a year and foreign holidays.

I have to be honest, this is a massive deal for me personally. It seems that the **virtually inevitable** fact of life in UK for us (middle class etc) that **as we grow older we amass more wealth and capital**, we get nicer houses, bigger cars, more comfortable things, more gadgets, more pension funds and savings.....basically more **buffer against poverty and discomfort**.

Its just the same for majority of British Christians – and it's a **challenge** (in fact, it's a source of discomfort emotionally/ethically for a lot of us..... **We are no different from the rest of society** we are **called to be salt and light** to).

God's on my case about it.....and others in KC. **Let's not ignore it, lets look at God's heart.... And aim to respond in repentance and faith.**

God's blueprint

God lays out a blueprint in the bible for how he wants human society to be ordered. A blueprint for how a healthy and just society should interact, and the kind of provisions which people should make, to avoid the situation where there are 'haves' ranged against 'have-nots'.

Gods' attitude

What is God's attitude towards poverty and hunger. What's his ideal?

- Speaking to his new covenant people.....
- Deut 15:4-5 - **However, there should be no poor among you**, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.
- This is so radical that it should take our breath away! And its **utterly uncompromising** – he isn't saying we should be charitable, give to aid agencies etc he's saying **we should eradicate poverty** altogether.

Jesus, of course famously said '**the poor will always be with you**' (Matt 26:11)

- This isn't an excuse for ignoring them! This is an **acknowledgment** that we have poor in the world because of the **effect of sin**.
- **Humans are inherently selfish** and human society has over thousands of years become weighed in favour of some, and against others – the have's and have-nots.
- **The reason** that the world's resources are unequally shared. The reason that the structures of world trade and finance are stacked in favour of the rich 'west' **is not by accident**. Its **because we are fundamentally selfish** and **want what's best for ourselves**, not for others.

That's why **Jesus** consistently taught his followers about living by the new covenant, the new '**law of love**' (Marjorie spoke of last week). As we seek to Love God with everything, and love our neighbour as ourselves, it stops being an **external religion**, and is instead **internal – overflowing** into our everyday lives. **If we love God and our neighbour, we can't get away with ignoring the poor!**

Covenant provisions to stop selfishness

That's why **God put provisions in place** in his initial covenant with the Israelites to restrain their natural bent towards selfishness, and **to promote justice and compassion in everyday living**.

In the first 5 books of the bible there are **various laws** about not harvesting to the very edge of the field, or not going over a field a second time, or not picking up the grapes which fall to the ground in the process of harvesting them – so that the poor, widows, orphans, needy etc could gather them instead.

God's basically saying – '**don't over-farm, don't over-produce**, don't always try for the highest yield, at the expense of feeding others who are less fortunate and don't own such big fields. **In modern mantra = People before profits**

Isaiah 58

Later in history, the prophet Isaiah speaks to the Israelites on God's behalf. **He speaks out at them for applying the letter of the law, but ignoring the spirit**, the over-arching principle of justice and mercy which God holds so dear. There are **clear modern parallels for us**, today, in KC.

Read it yourselves! There isn't space today to go into detail – but I will in future sermon. It presents a powerful picture of how **well-meaning God-followers can stray away** from His standards. The people think they are doing exactly what God wants them to do

- They fast, they worship
- They go through rituals of repentance (saying sorry)
- They keep the law, they pray

So they are bewildered why God isn't blessing them, as they think they deserve for all their efforts.....v3 “why have we fasted and you have not seen?”

God's response is this: ‘is that what you call a fast!?’ Just the external stuff – ritual, paying lip service, going thru the motions of worship. While all along there is a mass of injustice going on right in the middle of your lives (v 4-5)

What **God identifies as wrong** is this

- Exploitation of their workers
- Oppressing the poor
- Disregard for justice
- Neglect of those in need

Basically, those god-followers who were called to live a lifestyle that matched God's heart for the world, were causing a lot of the injustice themselves.

Instead, God reminds his people of what his heart beats to, in terms of social interaction

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

The principle is this

- put people before profits
- live whole-lifestyles which add to justice and generosity for the poor
- **then you will know God's blessing** (v.8-12)

You may think that all this OT detail doesn't apply today, but I would suggest that in fact they apply just as much.....

Firstly, let's take an honest look below the surface, behind the label, of our affluent western society, and see what structural issues are really going on. Certainly, in the UK there aren't the crushing levels of poverty which we've seen a little of this morning in Bolivia. **But there is plenty of poverty in the UK – and its often caused by injustice.** Situations like asylum seekers, inner city housing estates, the homeless etc

Secondly, we should be **ready to examine ourselves, our own lifestyles**, for ungodly actions which impact other people, even without us realising it.

- Today we are a rich nation, powerful, our lives are full of choices.
 - Are we making the right – the righteous – choices?
 - Or are we making wrong choices in God's sight?

Our response? So how might we respond to this challenge, in our everyday lives? **Let's remember our motivation.** Today we are **rightly giving thanks** for what God gives to us, and for the society in which we live. Our motivation should be this

- **Because we are thankful, so we give away with a generous heart**
- Jesus put it nicely..... 'freely you have received, freely give'

How should we respond? What's our responsibility as god's people in the face of the huge injustices and inequalities in this world?

Firstly, I believe we have a responsibility to **act as stewards** of this earth and all the resources God give us, and the society and governments in which we have a voice and role. **Just because we don't share the same problems, doesn't mean we don't have a responsibility** towards those people who do have to worry about these things. Just because those experiencing crippling poverty live half a world away from us, doesn't mean they have no claim on us

Second – I believe we have a **responsibility not to make things worse!** When we have the ability, **not to buy-in to any system** which perpetuates injustice and inequality. God's call is this: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? **To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.**" (Micah 6:8)

Even though **I have brought a challenging message today** – to myself just as much as to you – **I'm not saying 'don't celebrate'**. When you have a family meal etc you have the best food and throw a party (just like God does with all the imagery of feasts in the bible). **The problem is the balance** – the **danger is that feasting is all we do**, and we don't do the other side. We are less good at the living-out thanksgiving in the sense of working for social justice and beating back poverty wherever we encounter it. So by all means eat chocolate – but **why not buy fair trade. Try to bless others at the same time as you enjoy yourselves** (invite others for meal, share, give some away). At a **global level**, don't think you are powerless! When you encounter the campaigns for debt relief, or Bob Geldof and Tony's plan for Africa – **get involved, make your voice heard.**

There are loads of ways of practically making a difference.... **Go away and think about it**

- How can I best live a whole-life, and lifestyle, of discipleship to God?
- Where am I over consuming?
- Where am I ignoring injustice or the poor because its too inconvenient?
- **Where can I make a positive difference, just by a small lifestyle change** (like buying fair trade where possible)?
- What is God saying to me in this?
- Finally, how can I live the 'law of love'
 - Out of my thankful heart, how can I love God and love my neighbour?