Sermon preached by Richard Lewney on 27th September 2026

Readings: Deuteronomy 26.1-11 Luke 6.32-38

Harvest Thanksgiving

I don't know about you, but I hate being told to thank somebody. I mean, it happened more when I was a child, but I can remember the feeling.

It's not the 'thanking' that's the problem. I like to think that I recognise when someone's done something nice for me and am quick to say thanks to them. I try to remember to thank the bus driver when I get off the bus, even though you might say that they're 'just doing their job'. If Emily gets up first in the morning and brings me a cup of tea in bed, I think I usually say 'thank you'. And I usually thank someone who serves us in a restaurant. I might even fill in a review - you never know.

So 'thanking' is fine. But being *told* to say 'thank you' is something else. I think it's the assumption that I *need* to be told to do the right thing. That I wouldn't otherwise have thought of it. That my lack of gratitude somehow reflects not just on me but on my family.

And, in a way, if you have to be *told* to say 'thank you', then it doesn't really mean what it should, does it? It should be an expression of your appreciation, your gratitude. But if it's forced out of you, it's just an empty phrase. And I imagine it feels that way to the person being thanked. I mean, who wants to receive a reluctant thank you?

And that seems to be true of God, too. God doesn't seem to be impressed by people who do religious stuff …but whose heart isn't in it. The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures come down hard on that kind of religious one-upmanship, showing off, and Jesus called it out too with some harsh words. 'Don't be like the hypocrites', he says, the people who like to be *seen* to be doing something noble and 'unselfish'. He said that the very poor widow who gave a tiny amount in the temple offering had given more than the much larger donations given by people who could easily afford it.

So our Harvest Festival is not about compulsory thanksgiving. It's not even about nostalgia for simpler times, when a community lived off the land and people were genuinely relieved and grateful when the harvest had been brought in. It might be about stopping to think about how our daily needs are met, whether that's the journey of our food from farm to table, or the people around us who care for us and support us. About being thankful for having enough and doing what I can to help those who don't.

Because there's a great temptation, isn't there, to want to think that we somehow deserve what we have. 'I worked hard for that'. 'I'm good at this stuff'. Or, most ancient of all, 'God has blessed me because I am in his good books'. And the opposite works too. 'They are lazy'. 'They don't have what it takes'. 'God is withholding blessing, so they must have done something bad.

The reading we had from Deuteronomy is about shaking people out of that attitude. The words that the priest was to say were all about how everything that the people had was a gift from God. 'My ancestor was a wandering Aramean… The Egyptians treated us badly… The LORD heard us… saw our suffering… brought us out of Egypt. Gave us this land filled with many good things'…. '*gave* us this land'.

And if we can just take that to heart, we might let go of the temptation to say to ourselves 'this is mine and I deserve it'. We might be moved to open-hearted generosity: share the good things that the LORD has given you. Give, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.

In the end, it's what's in the heart that counts, that overflows into our kingdom living each day. And that too, of course, is a gift of God, a work of the Spirit, making and remaking us each day.

> Create in me a pure heart, God.
> Make my spirit right again. (Psalm 51.10)

Richard Lewney
27 09 2026