Sunday 4th October

Harvest All-age Eucharist

I wonder if you have any rituals in your family. Often, these comforting little traditions are connected with special times of year and, in my family, one of those times is Christmas. For example, it’s really important to us that my Dad creates his unique canapes on Christmas Eve afternoon... and he hides decades-old little festive gnomes all over the house which we have to hunt. This morning, I want to introduce you to another of our traditions.

It’s Christmas morning in 1983. I am seven years old. Can you imagine that? Picture a much smaller, sweeter version of this with more hair. We’ve just got back from church and I am sitting in our living room at home with my two sisters. There are parcels like this one in neat piles around our feet and we are itching to tear open the paper and see what’s inside: for weeks I’ve been dreaming of Lego, train sets, remote control cars…

My mum points to a particular parcel and suggests that I open that one first. Let’s imagine that this is that parcel…

What is it going to be? I’ve had my eye on some Space Lego since late September and I’ve dropped plenty of hints when we’ve been out shopping…

I’m struggling to be enthusiastic about this - it’s very nice and I do like stationery, but I’m a little concerned that the Lego space station has been forgotten…

You may have guessed that the reason I was urged to open this very useful gift first was so that I could write down all of the presents that I had received and who had given them to me. The notepad was to help me through the chore of Boxing Day thank you letters. I must confess, that the writing of thankyou letters did seem to be a bit boring when I was seven… particularly when I was desperate to spend all day putting together my new train set. Taking the time to say ‘thank you’ was not a top priority.

Perhaps I was acting a bit like the nine men in our gospel reading who dash off back to their families to celebrate feeling better and being accepted by the priests back into society...

In today’s gospel, narrated so beautifully for us by Mabel, ten men with leprosy cry out to Jesus for help. Leprosy is a horrible disease which people were frightened of and, because of that, sufferers, already some of the poorest in society, were shunned and treated as outcasts, even by their families.

In response to their cries for help Jesus says: ‘go and show yourselves to the priests’, and as they set off, they are immediately cured of their disease. Nine of them rush off, so excited to be cured, ecstatic that they will be accepted back into society… that they will be able to see their families again.

But one of them turns back to Jesus. He praises God and falls at Jesus’ feet saying thank you that his life has been changed. Jesus asks him ‘were not ten made well? Where are the other nine?’

Both of today’s readings seem to be about how we receive gifts.

In our reading from Deuteronomy the writer remembers all of the gifts that the people of Israel have been given and says ‘take care that you do not forget the Lord your God.’ In other words, don’t forget to say thank you to God.

In the story of the ten lepers, we see two different ways of receiving a gift. All ten are given the gift of healing… and then nine run off - you can’t see them for dust. They had probably been so desperate to be cured of their terrible illness… longing for this gift of healing, that they grabbed it and rushed off to the priests quickly in case it disappeared.

But one man behaves differently. He stops for a moment and thinks about what has happened… the incredible gift that he has been given... and who it is that has given it to him… He doesn’t grasp this treasure and run off. He holds it lightly, with an open hand and he turns back to say ‘thank you’. In doing so he receives a further gift of words of peace from Jesus: ‘get up and go on your way, your faith has made you well’.

So, I wonder if the important point to take away from this story is what happens when, instead of saying ‘thanks very much… got to go... bye!!’ …. we pause to say thank you. When we receive a gift with a slightly less tight grip. The man who stops to think about what has happened to him is able to have a conversation with Jesus and build a deeper relationship with him.

If I had not written thank you letters to my family who had sent me gifts at Christmas they might have been a little miffed, but they would not have stopped sending presents… but the fact that I did write to them, and continue to do so, has deepened my relationship with them. Over the years, taking the time to pause and to be thankful for the gift has helped me to be thankful for the people.

On Sunday, it was a joy to see amongst the little band of supporters at my ordination service, my godmother, who was present at my baptism in 1977 and still, 43 years later, is walking alongside me offering wisdom and support.

Living in a city, as we are here in Sheffield, while the countryside is not far away, it’s possible to lose quite a bit of the original feeling of a harvest celebration in church - giving thanks for the gifts of creation, rain to help the crops to grow… but the point of a harvest celebration remains the same. It’s an opportunity to pause, to reflect and to be thankful... To loosen our grip on the gifts that we have been given and reflect with open hands and hearts. It’s a great opportunity to do a bit of maintenance on our attitude of gratitude… to think about those gifts we have been given… our talents (music, dancing, making things…) ...access to clean water, healthcare and shelter… perhaps to begin to be able to recognise everything as a gift from God.

If we don’t pause and say thank you - Jesus isn’t going to get into a huff and stop loving us and showering us with gifts… but in pausing and remembering and saying thank you we are nurturing and deepening our relationship with him, with each other, and with the created world.

So, today, I’m thankful for this apparently small gift... and to my Mum for making sure that those thank you letters were a top priority at Christmas. I’m thankful for this opportunity at Harvest to pause for a moment, amidst all the noise and anxiety of daily life, to think about all of the gifts that we have been given and are given every day… and rather than rushing onto the next thing… to turn to Jesus and say ‘thank you’.

An attitude of gratitude, demonstrated by the man in our gospel who turns back to Jesus, seems to be about pausing and thinking… giving space for our thankfulness to grow… finding ways to hold all that we are given with an open hand, not frightened of God’s gifts being taken away, but able to receive them with thanks and to share them with generosity.