

From this week's Lesson, from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

*For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.* Isaiah 55:

+

It is just another miserable, dehumanising, exhausting day in a long line of miserable, dehumanising, exhausting days in the concentration camp where they have been forced to live and work.

For Victor Frankl, it is just one more grey day in an endless procession of grey days. As he wrote of another similar day:

the dawn was grey around us; grey was the sky above; grey the snow in the pale dawn light; grey the rags in which my fellow prisoners were clad, and grey their faces.

But on this particular day, he and his fellow prisoners are back in their huts, resting on the floor after another long day of hard work; work designed to break their spirits just as much as it was designed to break their bodies; to break them emotionally as well as physically.

They are dead tired; and as they lie there resting in the midst of all the dirt and grime, they hold their rough soup bowls in their hands.

But suddenly, in the midst of all this despair and sorrow, another prisoner rushes into the hut. He gets their attention and tells them that they need to run outside; out to the assembly grounds. And in spite of their exhaustion, they force themselves to get up. Perhaps it's the sense of urgency in his voice.

So, as tired as they are, they struggle to their feet and go out. And as they emerge from the hut, they suddenly see the reason why this man has called them to go out. As they emerge from their hut, they see a sunset of incredible beauty. The dark sinister looking clouds are glowing in the west, as Frankl describes that moment of transcendent beauty; and the whole sky is alive with clouds of ever-changing colours and shapes, from steel blue to blood red. The dismal grey mud huts in which they struggle to survive provide a sharp contrast as the puddles on the ground dance with light, brightly reflecting the glowing sky.

After a few minutes of silence, deep, moving silence, one prisoner remarks about how beautiful the world could be.

And they return to their hut.

Back to that muddy grey world.

Knowing that tomorrow will be just as dark and dismal and dehumanising as every day is.

But, for a brief moment, they have seen how their bleak, grey world could be transformed, just a little, by awe and beauty and wonder. Even gratitude, in that dark and dismal place.

At times life can seem incredibly hard. I think that we're living through such a time. We've had COVID on our minds for nearly three years now; we've lived with the challenges of lockdowns and isolation and fear; and even now, with so much of that

long gone, we're still coping with the longer-term aspects of the pandemic: supply chain disruptions, inflation, social division, resentment, anger, mistrust; with all the consequences of health-care workers and teachers who've been stretched to do so much more with so much less.

Throw in the instability of the war in Ukraine; and a couple of devastating hurricanes; and the increasingly more obvious reality of climate change, and just watching the news can be deeply traumatic.

It seems that everyone's angry; or frightened; or both.

Which, to my mind, makes this week's celebration of Harvest Thanksgiving so incredibly important.

That's true every year but maybe even more so right now.

Because if all we ever hear is the sound of disorder and division; if all we ever see are images of all the things that are broken, then we'll never be able to see those moments of reverence and awe that have the power to transcend our brokenness.

Gratitude helps us to see what we so often cannot see even though it's right in front of our face.

Gratitude helps us to see what gets overlooked when all that we can hear are the voices of anger and division. That's what gratitude does. Not one day each year but every day.

Giving thanks to the God who is the source of our hope.

Our annual celebration of Harvest Thanksgiving is a reminder that real happiness can never be defined just by what we have but by our ability to be grateful for what we have.

Giving thanks is the secret to real happiness; not just for this year's harvest, as we do today; not just for our national heritage, as we will do on Monday, but for everything: even those hard and difficult moments that challenge us and stretch us and make us grow. Gratitude grounds us. It takes our natural dissatisfaction with all the regular routines of life and transforms it. It helps us to put all of life in a larger, wider canvas; and to see everything in relation to the whole.

It's all about changing our lives; not just making them not more 'filled' but more fulfilling; more complete. And gratitude does that by reshaping our hearts.

Gratitude allows us to live hopefully rather than fearfully; to live generously rather than selfishly; to live patiently and compassionately rather than bitterly and resentfully.

It lifts us from the negativity and cynicism of a broken world.

It lifts from us the desperation and dissatisfaction of a world that always looks for more but never finds what it really wants.

In a world where it is all too easy to take everything granted, and all too easy to be bitter when we don't get what we want, gratitude fills our hearts with wonder.

It finds grace in every moment; and it challenges us never to forget the God who has promised to be with us forever; the God who has blessed us in times of comfort and joy; and strengthened us in times of darkness and fear.

Gratitude helps us to keep our eyes on Christ at all times, no matter what comes to us: that he might guide us through both success and sorrow; through both joy and sadness, so that we not lose our way in the good times, or our hope in the bad.

*O give thanks unto the LORD, for he is gracious: for his mercy endureth for ever.*