

I do still feel slightly awkward as an Englishman having to stand up and talk on a day as American as Thanksgiving. I suppose it's not as bad as being asked to talk on July the fourth, because there's nothing good to say about that. But anyway. I do know something about the importance of giving thanks, however.

The collect for today begins, "Gracious father, we give you thanks for the fruits of the earth." And I get that, even if I'm not American. So, I've resolved to say a few words about the importance of giving thanks. I made this resolution before I looked at the reading set for today. When I did, I was a bit disappointed and surprised that, actually, neither of the readings mentions the importance of giving thanks.

Joel begins, "Do not fear," and the gospel starts with Jesus saying, "Do not worry." However, I don't think that fear and worry are unrelated to thankfulness. In fact, I think that cultivating a thankful heart is the antidote to fear and worry. The ancient thinker, Cicero, said, "A thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, but the parent of all other virtues." And gathering in church today is an important step of cultivating a thankful heart. By coming together to worship today, we're acknowledging that there is someone to whom we can thank for the richness and abundance of this world. You might think that's an obvious point to make, which indeed it is, but it is sadly a step that many people in the world today are unable to make.

I often talk in church, because it made a very big impression on me, was when I was asked to do the funeral of an atheist, and because I knew the deceased's sister. And I had to do the service on the condition that I didn't mention God. So, I thought that was fine. Then I started to plan the service, and I realized that I had to edit out the first prayer that I normally say in a funeral service, which is a prayer of thanksgiving, giving thanks for the life of the deceased. And that had to go. Because in an atheistic funeral service, there is no one to thank for the life of the deceased. There's a

famous English actor, who I'm sure some of you know, Steven Fry, who's evangelistically atheistic. And he wrote this on a flyer for a homeless charity, which feeds the homeless. He said this... I just happened to cut it out because it came through our door in London. "Good food, good wine and good company enrich our lives beyond measure. Most of us don't say grace these days because we don't know who to thank for the inestimable pleasures of the table." That was a throwaway remark to him, but it's a deeply sad comment on his life and the life of many others. He doesn't know who to thank. And it's a corrosive comment. We've gathered here today because we do know who to thank, not just for the inestimable riches of the table but for the abundance of all of life, in fact, the very gift of life itself. Joel says in our reading, "You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you."

We know that everything in life comes as a gift from God. And we gather together today to give thanks to God, our creator, the creator of the world, for all his gifts to us and to humankind. Giving thanks to God makes us an appreciative people. We don't expect the good things that come our way. We learn to appreciate them. We need to move from expectation to appreciation. And I'm mindful that I speak when all I hear on the news is about the supply shortage. Says something about how we have, as a society, got less and less good at appreciating what we do have, and do more and more expecting of what we don't have. Anyway, coming to church today reminds us that we are to see life as a gift, which is to be valued and appreciated. So, let's resolve to continue today to practice thankfulness.

And let me finish with offering some habits that might help us cultivate a thankful heart; simple things we can do to become more thankful. We need to practice regularly giving thanks, because giving thanks doesn't come naturally. It might come easier to some than others, but I don't think it comes naturally, which is why we could all do with practicing. I learned this lesson when I worked at a

youth club in London after I left university. I was the senior youth worker, and there was a time when several members of staff weren't very happy with the big boss, who was called Roger. And I was deputed to go and share our concerns with Roger. I sat him down, and I said, "Roger, I've got something serious to say." I said, "The volunteers aren't terribly happy. They're feeling a bit taken for granted. So let me translate that into English. That means, Roger, the volunteers are livid and they're on the verge of walking out." He said, "Well, what can I do about it?" I said, "Well, you might try and say thank you a bit more." And I'll never forget his reply, he said, "Thank them? I haven't got time to go around thanking people." And it's at that very moment that I realized that giving thanks doesn't come naturally. It's something we have to practice. We have to deliberately make a practice of giving thanks, if we are to avoid becoming like Roger.

Sir John Templeton said that he begins each day...doesn't get out of bed...till he lies in his bed and thinks five different things to be thankful for. And that means, he says, that he starts his day by lifting his heart to God in praise and thanksgiving. And he reckons that that simple spiritual exercise is the reason that he has found so much contentment in life. He has managed to cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

And secondly, we can learn to express gratitude and thankfulness regardless of the situation. St. Paul says, "Rejoice always. Pray constantly. Give thanks in all circumstances." And he wrote those words from prison. We're to be thankful at all times, not just the good times. Even when things are really bad, we can thank God for his presence with us in the darkest of situations. And, of course, we never see the full picture. We can never look at any situation and know exactly what's happening and why. God is working his purposes out. St. Paul says in Romans, "All things work for good for those who love him." Maybe developing the practice of thanking God in all things will help us see how bad experiences can sometimes produce good outcomes.

And as we get into the habit and practice of thanksgiving, we will find that our priorities change. As Jesus says in his gospel, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." A truly thankful heart acknowledges God as source of all life.

So let's resolve today on this day of Thanksgiving to be thankful to God and see all of life as gift.

Amen.