

We've just heard two wonderful passages of scripture. The first from the book of Deuteronomy and the second from the gospel of Luke. Lots of words, but with a very simple message.

Gratitude leads to generosity. That's the simple message. Gratitude leads to generosity.

Deuteronomy as a whole is a pretty intense read - it is full of detailed instructions and prescriptions for living well. Much of which remains absolutely relevant today; don't murder, don't steal, don't covet things that aren't yours, keep the Sabbath, honour your parents - these, and the other 10 Commandments are still the very best guide for a good life.

The passage we've just heard, and the chapters that come before it, are just as relevant to us as they ever have been; these are things which we should inwardly digest and base our lives on. And they tell us that very simple message - gratitude leads to generosity.

This part of Deuteronomy is overwhelmingly concerned with those on the edge of society; it speaks particularly about the widow, the orphan and the refugee - those who had nothing. It contains detailed instructions about how farmers should not strip their land of all the harvest, but leave enough for those who have nothing, and how poor labourers should be paid properly and on time, and about how payments should be weighed out on accurate scales, so that no-one is cheated out of their wages. Clearly, if God opens the storehouses of bounty and grants prosperity to some then it is so that they might lend generously to others and borrow from none. They are to be a witness to the open-handedness of God.

God has given the Israelites a land flowing with milk and honey, a land with the potential to produce everything they need, and more. And they've been given it, not because they have earned it or particularly deserve it - they were given it simply because God loves them and is generous.

And when something is given as a gift, it should be received with gratitude. It's one of the earliest things we say to our children when they're given something - 'Make sure you say thank you'. To be grateful is to acknowledge that we've been given something without earning it.

And because they have been given so freely they are to give freely in turn. They have been given abundance, and they are to give abundantly. Do that, says the author of Deuteronomy, and you will live well.

Gratitude leads to generosity, and a generous society is a fulfilled and blessed society.

And in Luke's gospel Jesus says the same thing. God has created such astonishing beauty and abundance - and if we have any doubts about that, just take a look around and see again the glories of the natural world that fill this place - God has given us so much, but don't ever think that it's ours to hold on to.

We have been given abundantly, we need to share abundantly. Gratitude leads to generosity.

In Luke's Gospel a rich farmer enjoys a bumper harvest – one that will make him even wealthier than he already is. But he has a problem. His difficulty is not what to do with so much produce, but where to put it. It never occurs to him to do anything but keep it all.

He chooses not to share his bounty in a world where many people lived dangerously close to hunger and where the illness of one person might leave an extended family destitute. Rather than share his plenty, he simply decides to increase his personal storage capacity. His speech to self-interest reveals his isolation from the world around him as he anticipates the good life promised by this new financial security.

He has no thought beyond that of 'eat, drink and be merry'. This toast to abundance, however, is deprived of the customary conclusion from the prophets – 'for tomorrow we may die'. The irony here, of course, is that God makes an unusual personal intervention in the story to demand not only the wealth of the farmer but his life as well – not tomorrow but today, he will die.

Let's be clear – it is not the farmer's wealth that triggers divine intervention. John Pridmore, in his book 'The Word is Very Near You', comments on this passage, 'were wealth a vice we would not be trying to make poverty history'. The problem is not one of making a profit – it is his greed.

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Jesus tells us that gratitude is the release button on hands that hold too tightly.

We live so much of our lives with our hands clenched tight holding onto all that we have. But remembering that everything we have is God's gift to us means we have to open up and live with our hands wide open. And when our hands are open like this it's so much easier to share what we've been given.

And the call to be generous with what we've been given is as necessary today as it was when Moses first read out the 10 Commandments. We are so blessed, so privileged and so abundantly provided for. But nothing we have been given is ours. It's all gift. It's all meant to evoke gratitude, and then generosity.

And here's the really wonderful thing about Jesus' words; if we live from them - if we are grateful for everything we've been given, and if we don't hold on to it too tightly, and if we're generous in sharing it with others, especially those who need it most - if we do these things, we will discover what it is to be really blessed. The more we hang on to our belongings, and the more anxious we are about having enough, the more anxious we will become.

Have you ever noticed how 'enough' is never 'enough'? Have you noticed how when we clench our hands we feel anxious, but when we release our hands and open up this brings peace?

The more we know that everything we have is a gift, and that it isn't actually 'ours', the more we can be free to give it away and to bless others with it - and as we do so, the more we discover the fullness of life that God offers.

Gratitude leads to generosity. It's the simplest of truths, and one of the best.

Be grateful. Be generous.

Live with hands wide open, and know the blessings that God longs for us to receive.

Gratitude leads to generosity. In Jesus' name. Amen.

