

LEFTOVERS CAN BE A DISAPPOINTMENT

Deuteronomy 28. 1-11

Philippians 4. 4-9

John 6. 25-35

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I wonder if you have ever seen the cartoon that shows a family sitting down to supper. The father says, 'I don't mean to complain about leftovers, but I've already said grace for this meal three times.'

It's a funny cartoon, and very apt, particularly around Christmas and Easter when we probably see turkey and ham on a very regular basis. Leftovers are okay, but after a while we get tired of them. Leftovers can be a disappointment! We all like to have fresh foods. We like and expect the best.

I don't know about you, but I've heard of donations made to charities that included kitchen chairs that had rips in them; stained bed sheets and towels; clothing that was too damaged to be of any use; and tins of food that are either past their sell-by date or banged up and dented. Sometimes people offer less than second best to those in need; things that, if they really thought about it, they would not want to receive themselves. As I said, leftovers can be a disappointment!

The theme of leftovers versus the best is at the heart of our Old Testament text this morning. Some Biblical scholars believe that our reading is actually an outline of a ritual in the worship life of the Hebrews. It was something that was celebrated as they entered into the Promised Land after their wilderness journeys and escape from Egypt. It is thought that the wording acted as a sort of creed, an expression of faith as they rehearsed God's blessings to them and formalised their response.

The whole crux of the passage is summed up in verses 8-11: “The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.” You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.’

In response to the Lord's blessings of signs, wonders, protection, guidance and the Promised Land itself, the people were to bring an offering of the first fruits of the land. The harvest was not their harvest, it was God's. In gratitude and love they were to bring God an offering of the best.

If the scholars are correct about this passage being the basis of a formal worship service, then we can assume that this offering of first-fruits was not a one-time thing but became, at least, an annual celebration. Indeed the theme of ‘first-fruits offerings’ occurs regularly in Scripture.

It all boils down to giving God the best, not the leftovers but the prime offering. Our calling to do so is not to rob us of what we think we have earned; but rather to remind us that all that we have is, firstly, a gift from God. Our pride of accomplishment is to be balanced with our appreciation of God's work in our lives.

In today's reality there are still those who give God what is leftover. I believe, however, that most of us do not do that. I suspect what many people do is give God what they feel they can spare. Leftovers assume a lack of concern. What we can spare assumes concern; but perhaps not priority. The principle of first-fruits teaches priority. It teaches priority in terms of our abilities, our finances and our time.

First-fruits teaches that our abilities, the things that we do well, are gifts from God. Perhaps we are a good organiser or a good listener or a good teacher or a good care giver. These abilities have been gifted to us. We are responsible for their use and impact. Sadly, a lot of people don't see themselves as being very capable, because they either downplay the importance of what they do or others downplay it for them. But the truth is that the things we do well – the things other people count on us to come through with, the things that would not be done if we did not do them – the abilities to do these things are all gifts from God. As Christians, the Lord claims a priority on our abilities. God seeks the use of those abilities as first-fruits for ministry in his name. The gifts of what we do well, when we offer them as a priority to God, can make a tremendous difference to the ministry of the Church.

In the same way, the first-fruits principle holds for the gifts that we offer financially. When we make the ministry of the Church a financial priority, we are returning to God something of what he has first given to us. Nowadays the budgets of most churches take on challenging proportions. St Stephen's is certainly no different. Our challenging budget makes us stretch. It makes us aware of the generosity of God; and it makes us aware of our own need to be as generous as we can. By returning to God a first-fruits portion of what God has given to us, we strengthen the ministry and witness of St Stephen's. We work towards developing ministries that make a difference in the lives of our own people and those who will join us in the future. All of this is possible when we take God's blessings seriously and respond with the gratitude of first-fruits.

The principle of first-fruits relates to yet another aspect of life, an area that is very precious as well. In fact, it is probably more precious than anything else. It is God's gift of time. Of all the areas of life where giving leftovers to God is most probable, it is in the area of time. Many of us are so busy that we lose track of the fact that our time is a gift from God. As God gives to us, so too does God deserve a response

from us, a response of time: time for prayer, meditation and study; time to develop and strengthen our relationship with God and others. In a world where giving time to our loved ones whom we can see and hear is already difficult, it is an even greater challenge to give our attention to our God, who we do not see or hear without a developed sensitivity. Time alone with God and time spent in service for God in ministry is essential if we are to truly lead lives that are fulfilled and meaningful.

Author Stephen Covey talks about priorities when he writes about the ‘tyranny of the urgent’. We can get so hung up on what we consider urgent that we lose all track of what is important. Urgent matters are usually visible. They press on us; they insist on action. But so often they are unimportant. Importance, on the other hand, has to do with results. If something is important, it contributes to our mission, our values and our high priority goals.

Very seldom do we find that God is urgent. However, God is always, always, always important! Covey writes eloquently and persuasively about setting priorities in life. Deuteronomy offers an eloquent and, I hope, persuasive challenge to do the same: In the words of our passage, ‘(God) brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.’ (29. 9-10).

Amen.