

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick  
The Thought for the Week  
Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2020

Jeannie Kerr detested dahlias!

Jeannie was a maiden lady – she had worked all her days in the local thread mill. She was quiet, exceptionally shy and a tad over anxious about everything.

Well, she loathed dahlias!

I found that out in my first year as a young Minister in my first parish in the village of Neilston on the day of the Harvest Festival Service. In those days, the congregation brought gifts of produce and flowers and the Church was decorated with packets of tea, bags of sugar, jars of jam and vases of chrysanthemums and piles of apples and cabbages – it was better dressed than the Cooperative Grocers Window further up the Main Street!

After the service, the items were made into parcels, the flowers into bouquets and they were taken by deliverers to the housebound and elderly members, a token of our affection and thoughts.

Well, later that afternoon, the doorbell rang at the Manse – here was Evelyn Moore, the Primary Sunday School Leader.

“Jeannie Kerr asked me to bring these back” and she proffered me a bunch of dahlias.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, a tad concerned.

“O,” said Evelyn, “She says she doesn’t like them as they are full of earwigs!”

Well, there was no answer to that. I took them and placed them in a vase in the hall of the Manse.  
It’s no loss what a friend gets!

I actually thought they looked rather attractive.

When I was Minister in Girvan North, there was a lady in the congregation who told me that she never liked to see dahlias in the floral arrangements on a Sunday morning as she thought that they were vulgar – to her those flowers were at the unworthy end of horticulture.

But what I saw in them was their glorious colours.

We are invited at this time in our calendar to rejoice in the abundance of the fragile created world; to be grateful for the harvests which bring daily sustenance to our tables, to be thankful for so much loveliness all around, and, amidst the very complex workings of food production, to praise God for the bounty which we so often take for granted.

And that is even more important in the strange times in which we are living.

And whilst the created world is certainly full of risk and natural threats, as Sir David Attenborough’s recent mind blowing programme “Extinction” demonstrated very forcibly, it is also extraordinarily plentiful, showing off and wasting much of its fruit in a profligate manner, offering us more than enough for human need.

As autumn comes on, the abundance of creation is before our eyes.

Despite our recent economic woes, you and I still live in one of the richest countries in the world. And that is why the existence of Food Banks is an abomination.

During my lifetime our expectations around our standard of living have increased enormously.

When I was a wee boy, one bathroom per house was the norm, and when you went on holiday, unless you were very well off and could go to a fancy hotel, you had to share a bathroom with others in your boarding house.

And so it goes on – fitted kitchens, personal computers, smart phones, ensuite facilities – all of these things have become part of the standard expectations of most people.

I enjoy these things; I am very grateful for them, and I don't relish the thought of living without them.

Nonetheless, from a spiritual point of view, not all is well with this picture.

In this prosperous society is the danger of what the author of Deuteronomy calls, "Forgetting the Lord your God" is very real; we can get so self-satisfied with our prosperous lifestyle that we lose our sense of need for God at all. And that is one of the reasons why we have so many empty pews in our kirks. God no longer features in the process.

The same dangers which confronted the people of Israel on the border of the Canaan centuries ago, confront us today.

Somehow God, upon Whom it all depends, is left out of the equation.

Swinburne's proud boast "Glory to Man in the highest, for Man is the master of things!" is the mantra of today.

One of the worst things that happened to the Kirk was the introduction of Sunday opening in our shops and stores – now, it is no longer a day for relaxation and family and chance to draw breath, but a day of frenetic activity like the other six. And we are reaping what we have sown here, with the dependence on tranquillisers, the breakdown of family relationships, to name but two.

I have been reading Andrew Marr's book "A History of Modern Britain", which traces Britain's transformation over the past sixty years. Andrew Marr describes the transformation as "death of politics by shopping." It has also been the death of organised religion by shopping. The meaning of life for countless people is to consume, to earn as much as you can so that you can spend as much as you can and accumulate as much as you can. And God is forgotten and pushed out of the picture.

And not only have we become a CONSUMING society, we have become an INDIVIDUALISTIC society. It's me, me, me. Everything revolves around me myself and I, and the family, the community, the neighbourhood, the church all take second place. Number One is the be all and end all. As long as I am alright, Jack, then I am not really all that worried about anyone else! And God is forgotten and pushed out of the picture, and greed and materialism run rampant.

That is what the writer of the Book of Deuteronomy feared – that once the Hebrews had settled in the land and were enjoying all the wonderful stuff around them, that they would forget God and just congratulate themselves on their good fortune.

"You will enjoy many good things," the writer says, "But be careful to remember the Lord your God."

Some of the finest and happiest people I have met were the poorest in the world's goods – they hailed from the Cook Islands, set in the Pacific Ocean, half way between New Zealand and the USA. They were members of the Boys' Brigade from Raratonga, and flew to Scotland to join us at the B.B. International Centenary Camp in September 1983, where over a thousand members of that wonderful movement from all over the globe met for a week under canvas in the grounds of Scone Palace.

I was privileged to have been invited to be one of the Chaplains and I was charmed by the Cook Islanders from the minute I met them – they smiled constantly and they showered us with gifts from their homeland – cushion covers which they had fashioned themselves in bright patterns; little hand made trinkets and letter openers, and they sought nothing in return. And what shone through each of those Cook Islanders was their tremendous faith in God and His Son, Jesus Christ. They were so grateful for all that they had! It put us from the more prosperous parts of the world to shame!

Their God was the One who was the Giver of every good and perfect gift.

You and I have a such a rich harvest in what we have and in who we are, recipients from that same God and Father of us all.

The Reverend Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister