

Sunday 4 October 2026 – ‘It Starts with Gratitude’ – Michael Bayley

This Sunday is our Harvest Festival. Michael Bayley takes his inspiration from Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone’s book Active Hope to illuminate how gratitude is where we should begin.

Readings:

Deuteronomy 8: 7-17, 19. Luke, 17: 11-19.

Sermon: ‘It starts with gratitude’ – Michael Bayley

The reading from Deuteronomy paints an attractive picture of what awaits the Israelites when they reach the promised land. ‘The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity’. [8: 7-9] But it comes with a warning: ‘Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’.. If you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you this day that you shall surely perish’. [8: 19]

This offers an obvious lead in to cataloguing all the ways in which humankind is ravaging the earth and not treating it with respect. The experience of the heat of the summer was a sharp reminder of the consequences of us continuing to treat nature in the way we are doing present. But we are all very much aware of that but I want to start from a different angle Gratitude as in the gospel reading about the ten lepers whom Jesus healed but only one of them returned to thank him.

Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone in their book *Active Hope* write: ‘When we come from gratitude, we become more present to the wonder of being alive in this amazing living world, to the many gifts we receive, to the beauty we appreciate. Yet the very act of looking that what we love and value in our world brings with it an awareness of the vast violation underway, the despoliation and unravelling. From gratitude we naturally flow to honouring our pain for the world’.¹ [p.38] But it starts with gratitude.

Macy and Johnson draw on the insights of the Haudenosaunee Native Americans. The Haudenosaunee regard gratitude as essential to survival. From the perspective of western individualism, this might seem hard to grasp... Self-made success is among the most highly prized or victories. If we can stand on our own two feet, why give thanks for the beans and the corn? Yet the notion that we can be completely independent all self-made denies the reality of our reliance on other people and on our natural world.

‘The Haudenosaunee see humans as interconnected parts of a larger web of life, where each being is uniquely valuable. Crops, trees, rivers, and the sun are respected and thanked as fellow beings in a larger community of mutual aid. If you have this view of life, you don’t tear down the forests or pollute the rivers. Instead... you accept other life forms as part of your extended family’. We are shown that our life exists with the tree life, that our well-being depends on the well-being of the vegetable life, that we are close relatives of the four legged beings. The Haudenosaunee ’s expressions of thanksgiving are: ‘the words that come before all else’.

¹ Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope. How to Face the Mess we’re in with Unexpected Resilience & Creative Power* (London: New World Library, 2022).

Instead of being reserved for a special day each year, thanksgiving becomes a way of life. [p. 50-51] They continue:

Generally in our world the parts remaining outside individual or corporate ownership such as the air or the oceans, are not seen as our responsibility... The Haudenosaunee tell a very different story, one in which our well-being depends on our natural world and gratitude keeps us to our purpose of taking care of life. When we forget the larger ecology we depend on get lost from our sight and the world unravels.²

Macy and Johnston push this one stage further: 'When we perceive our deeper identity as an ecological self that includes not just us but also all life on earth, then acting for the sake of our world doesn't seem like a sacrifice. It seems a natural thing to do'. [p. 76]

That last insight is important. Caring for the earth is not an optional extra. It is not just something we do at the harvest festival. It has to be an integral part of our Christian life.

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² Ibid., p. 52-3.