

St Mary's Church - Coxhoe, CO Durham

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CELEBRATING 140 YEARS



Gratitude ...

There is a character in a Russian novel who says, 'Ladies and gentlemen, let us assume that man is not stupid...but if he isn't stupid, he is monstrously ungrateful all the same – a creature that has two legs and no sense of gratitude.'

That is certainly true in a world where carping and criticising come more easily than praise and thanksgiving. The media thrive on depicting the negative aspects of life, condemning here and criticising there. It is an attitude which rubs off on all of us, and is like Aesop's fable of the donkey, who was never happy with his lot, whatever the weather, whatever the season. He groaned and complained from morning to night, from spring to winter.

Aesop told the story to remind us of the need to cultivate a spirit of gratitude – not to put blinkers on our eyes and be negative about life, but to open both eyes and hearts in thanksgiving for the world in which we live. We do that each time we celebrate the eucharist together. We do it when we say grace before meals.

The painting above called '*An Old Woman Saying Grace*' by Nicholas Maes brings this truth to mind.

Maes was a pupil of Rembrandt and he lived from 1632 to 1693. He spent most of his life in Dordrecht in Holland, and, apart from portraits, he delighted in painting women – women spinning or reading the Bible or preparing meals.

Here the woman is sitting down to a simple meal of soup, bread, butter and fish. But before she enjoys this food, she puts her hands together and, as simply as the food in front of her, mouths a prayer of thanks to God.

The artist tells us that this offering of prayer was a daily pattern for the woman. For on the ledge at her side lie an open Bible, a lamp and an hour-glass, and on a nail some keys. Signs that such prayer can be a light to illuminate the days of our lives and the key to open our hearts to the kingdom, just like the woman in the painting.

It is a tender moment, both concentrated and intimate. At first glance, there is a tinge of sadness for the table is set just for her. She will eat alone. And then our eyes catch sight of the cat's paw reaching up to enjoy the food as well.

Who knows? – something may spill over the edge of the table for the cat to enjoy. Simplicity and humour go hand in hand to remind us all of the need to be thankful. And thankfulness for food can spill over into thanksgiving for all the mercies and gifts that come our way in life.

[Editor: The Rev Michael Burgess on God in the Arts with a look at 'An Old Woman Saying Grace'. It now hangs in Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.]