Thanksgiving. Being grateful. It is the most natural thing in the world.

Well perhaps it doesn’t always feel natural. When the alarm clock wakens us from some pleasant dream and we realise that we have to get up and face a busy day, being thankful may not be our first instinct. And of course there are times when life gets very difficult and becomes painful and it seems difficult to be grateful for anything.

But fortunately not all of life is like that, and while we all have different personalities, some being more naturally cheery than others, each of us, at least sometimes, know what it is to be thankful, what it feels like to be grateful. So I do think that thanksgiving is a basic human instinct. Perhaps we can even say it is a basic human need.

We may have lost the habit and the art of giving thanks for food here in the prosperous west. Sometimes we have so much food that it feels like a danger rather than a delight. Sometimes we have so much choice that food feels like a pressure rather than a privilege. But whenever we take the time to stop and think, even for a few moments, none of us would deny that it is appropriate for us to be thankful for all that the world provides us with.

And sometimes in life we do not even need to pause and think. There are moments when we are almost ready to burst with gratitude. Times like when a baby is born, and we are overawed to discover that we are so close to the incredible process of creation, and love pours out of us towards a tiny child. What else can we be but grateful, in a moment like that?

It is natural for us to want to express our thanks. It is right for us to want to express our thanks, and it is good for us to be able to express our thanks. Can you imagine how miserable life would be if that were not the case, if we thought that we had nothing to be thankful for and no one to be thankful to? Can you imagine how stressful life would be if that were not
the case, if we thought that our well-being and even our survival depended on nothing but our own efforts?

Well for many people around us these things are indeed real problems. If you don’t believe that all of life and all of creation is a gift of God, then what do you have to be thankful for? It sounds ridiculous to imagine that anyone born into this world could somehow claim to be here on their own merit, but that is in effect how many live, acting as those who deserve something rather than those who are thankful for something.

If you don’t believe in God, then who do you have to be thankful to? Yes we can thank those who work to grow the food that we eat, those who plant it and pick it, process it and transport it, package it and sell it, not forgetting those who cook it. It is appropriate to be grateful to them. But despite the images which are so loved by advertising people, those who work in the food industry are not really working for the satisfaction of believing that there will be a happy customer in some western home enjoying the fruits of their labour.

At the risk of sounding cynical, though I believe simply being realistic, those who work in the food industry don’t want out thanks – they want our money. Which is quite right for they should be paid for their labour and their skills and we need to do far more than we do to face up to the scandal of poverty among the food producers of the world. We should be thankful to them and we should express our appreciation in real and practical ways, but that is not the same as the deep sense of gratitude which we can feel towards God, who makes it all possible.

Yes we can thank nurses and midwives and doctors for the birth of a child. Their care and advice is vital and in such a time of anxiety I have no doubt that most parents are extremely thankful to have them around. But they did not and they could not create the new life, and saying thank you to them is not the same as the deep sense of gratitude which we can feel towards God, who makes it all possible.

If you don’t believe that all of life and all of creation is a gift, what do you have to be thankful for? If you don’t believe in God, who do you have to
be thankful to? And if that is how you live, is life not rather dull and miserable?

Thanks be to God, we do not have to like those disciples who lived alongside Jesus but could only think of the world in terms of what they might be able to gain for themselves. Plenty of people approach life with that attitude, but we don't have to. Thanks be to God we can be like the psalm writer, who could look at the natural world and see the hand of God behind it and the activity of God within it, and who could be moved to such humble and poetic thanksgiving.

There is a man who is thankful and who knows that he has someone to thank:

13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
    the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
14 You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use,
    to bring forth food from the earth,
15 and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine,
    and bread to strengthen the human heart.

When you know that life is not something which we deserve but something which is a gift of God, then life starts to look very different. You are probably not going to have a great career living with that attitude. Your ego will not be desperate enough, driven by the need to prove your significance, to force you to spend all your days working and competing and winning things. You will just know that you matter because you know that God has gifted you with so much.

When you can see creation, not as a store of resources to exploited for profit but as a living gift of God, our world will start to look very different. You are probably not going to be rich living with that attitude, because you will not feel the need to own as much of it as you can, to protect and keep things just for you. You will be released to enjoy creation, and to enjoy the fruits of creation, just because it is wonderful and marvelous and lovely.

Being thankful, being grateful, should be the most natural thing in the world. And perhaps it is in rediscovering these truths that we learn not
only how to be happier people, but how to start living in ways which
honour all of human life and which care well for all of creation. Thanks be
to God, today we rejoice in the great generosity which is reflected in the
harvest of the earth.