

## Readings for Harvest Thanksgiving

2<sup>nd</sup> October 2022

### First Reading: Joel 2:21-27

Do not fear, O soil;

be glad and rejoice,

for the LORD has done great things!

Do not fear, you animals of the field,

for the pastures of the wilderness are green;

the tree bears its fruit;

the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

O children of Zion, be glad,

and rejoice in the LORD your God,

for he has given the early rain for your vindication;

he has poured down for you abundant rain,

the early and the later rain, as before.

The threshing floors shall be full of grain;

the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

I will repay you for the years

that the swarming locust has eaten,

the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,

my great army that I sent against you.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied

and praise the name of the LORD your God,

who has dealt wondrously with you.

And my people shall never again be put to shame.

You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel

and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other.

And my people shall never again be put to shame.

### Second Reading: Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about

these things. As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

Gospel: St John 6:25-35

When they found Jesus on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us, then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

**A Reflection for Harvest Thanksgiving**

Harvest festival is an annual reminder of the need to give thanks to God for all the good gifts he showers upon us. Yet it seems that harvest has hardly been out of the news this year, and for all the wrong reasons.

It wasn't long after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> February that reporters started speaking of how the blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports was seriously impacting the supply of a number of essential commodities to the rest of the world. I certainly didn't realise, until that point, just how much of the world's staple food supplies come from Ukraine. 10% of the world's wheat and barley, 16% of the world's maize, a staggering 42% of the world's sunflower oil. Major recipients of Ukrainian food included Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt and other countries in North Africa – places not known for an excess of food in normal times. The World Food Programme, which provides food for some of those in the greatest need, received 40% of its wheat from Ukraine. But it is not only these poorer countries that are affected – the whole world is affected as reduced supplies result in increased prices. And I don't even want to get started on how increased prices will mean that more of the food will go to richer countries.

Another problem that soon emerged was where this year's harvest in Ukraine could be stored while much of last year's harvest was stockpiled, unable to be exported. This year's harvest will, of course, be smaller due to the war – estimates suggest it will not be much above half that of the previous year.

Things improved slightly towards the end of July when the blockade was partially lifted and ships were again able to export goods through the Black Sea. That in itself is a risky business and we should all be grateful for the bravery of the seafarers taking that risk for the benefit of people across the world. Despite this, it is estimated that only about a third of the normal quantities are being exported by this route.

Elsewhere in Europe, drought and extreme heat has brought us pictures of parched crops dying in the fields with the consequent predictions of a reduced harvest. Meanwhile, in the Horn of Africa, the rainy season, and therefore the harvest, has failed for four consecutive years. Hundreds of thousands of people are starving, the fields are bare, the rivers dry. It is the worst drought in 40 years – since 1984 and Band Aid.

In our own country, the cost-of-living crisis has pushed many people into financial difficulties. The Trussell Trust, which runs many UK foodbanks, distributed 2.1 million food parcels in the year between April 2021 and March 2022, an increase of 14% on the previous year, and an increase of 81% in the last 5 years. Blythswood's Highland foodbanks have fed 8267 people in the past year - that's approximately 3.5% of the Highland population, another staggering figure.

When we consider all these desperate situations, and the many others that I haven't mentioned, it can all seem rather depressing and not something to give thanks for at all. Yet, in the midst of such circumstances, we do come to give thanks – not for all these terrible situations of course. But because, as people of faith, we know that however dire things are looking (and I think it is important to be realistic about how things really are), there is hope. Like Jeremiah last week, the prophet Joel reminds us that God promises that these things will not last for ever. He says:

'...the pastures of the wilderness are green; ...the tree bears its fruit; ...the threshing floors shall be full of grain; ...you shall eat in plenty and be satisfied and praise the name of the Lord your God.' How important must these words seem to those in East Africa who are starving, how they must hang onto these promises as they wonder if the world has forgotten them.

But we too must hang onto these promises and think about what they actually mean for us. Today, we are thankful to God that he has dealt kindly with us, that we are not in as desperate a situation as some others; that in this country, should we be in dire need, there are organisations we can turn to. We should also be thankful that God has placed us in a position to be generous in different ways. We are all able to be generous according to our means, to offer some help and share God's hope with those who are less fortunate. As Christ's hands and feet in the world, our harvest offerings today are part of that. But it is not then a case of job done. We need to carry that harvest spirit of gratitude forward in our lives. Sadly, the needs of the world, the appeals for help both locally and further afield don't stop after our harvest festival, so we need to continue to be generous as we are able, to enable those promises of God to be fulfilled through us, God's people.

And we need to remember that it is not just with our money and our goods that we are called to be generous, for not all of us can do that. We can also offer our time and our talents: maybe our ability to spend a few hours helping out, or by speaking out – adding our voice to campaigns for change or for more generous international aid.

And, perhaps most importantly, God has also given us the gift of prayer. In the passage from Philippians, Paul urges us not to be anxious but to turn to God in prayer, to make our requests known to God. But prayer is not a one-way process. Praying for those in need - telling God, who already knows, and then turning away is of little use. Prayer is a two-way process; having brought those needs to mind, we then need to listen to God, to those promptings of the Holy Spirit that nudge us into action.

I was struck this week by the words of Bishop James Jones in his 'Thought for the Day' on Radio 4 last Monday. He said, and I paraphrase significantly, that the catalogue of bad news stories we so often hear, and indeed as I gave at

the beginning of this reflection, 'makes one think there are no decent people left in the world'. But he also commented on how, for days after the death of the Queen, the news was dominated by the dignified response of millions of ordinary people who 'eschewed violence, loved silence and honoured one another'. Ordinary, decent, good people who were, he argued, led by a spiritual instinct.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus tells us: 'I am the bread of life' and urges us to work for the food that endures for eternal life. So, our own spiritual nourishment depends partly on our response to God and to the needs of God's world. We need to keep ourselves aware of the many difficult situations in the world, rather than turning away because it all seems too difficult, remembering and sharing God's promises of hope and the essential goodness of all God's creation. We need to keep praying, and then turning that prayer into action - to care for the poor and needy, and for this beautiful world. As Father David said in his reflection two weeks ago, 'this is our sacred task'. This promised hope in the face of difficulty, this belief in the essential goodness of creation, this sacred task to care, these are truly things to be thankful for today.