

Readings for Harvest Thanksgiving

1st October 2023

First Reading: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Gospel: St Luke 12:16-30

Jesus told the people a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build

larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, you of little faith! And do not keep seeking what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that seek all these things, and your Father knows that you need them.

A Reflection for Harvest Thanksgiving

Today we come to Harvest Thanksgiving – a day to be thankful for the produce of the land and sea that sustains us. And we have much to be thankful for. In this country, food is plentiful, our shops are well-stocked, and we have an extensive choice of products representing the harvest of the land and sea all over the world. We live in a temperate climate, and one that is not being excessively ravaged by the most extreme effects of climate change, so we can grow our own produce if we wish and have a garden to do so. As our Old Testament reading reminds us, God has indeed given us a land flowing with milk and honey, and so, as the last verse says, we ‘celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house’.

But of course, there is no room for complacency. We are fortunate, and we know that others are not. Our Gospel reading does give us welcome reassurance that we don’t need to worry for God provides for all our needs, but that reassurance follows a stark warning about storing up wealth for ourselves. As followers of Jesus, we have a duty to provide from our abundance for those who do not have enough; we have a duty to work for a fairer sharing of the earth’s resources. This is one reason why Harvest Thanksgiving has also traditionally included the sharing of harvest gifts with those less fortunate.

We are coming to the end of the Season of Creation for which this year’s theme has been ‘Let Justice and Peace Flow’. The distribution of food, both between nations and between people within nations, is an issue of justice. Food is essential to life and, as such, should not simply be another economic commodity governed by market forces. And, as I said last week, God has provided enough for everyone.

So, how do we respond as Christians; how do we go about working for justice in food distribution? Some years ago, I came across the acronym ‘LOAF’ – you may also know it. LOAF stands for: Locally produced, Organically grown, Animal friendly, Fairly traded. This set of principles to guide our food choices was devised by the group Green Christians almost 20 years ago. It reminds us that, amidst the plethora of food available to us year-round, we can make choices that are more sustainable and just.

Let's remind ourselves briefly why these things are important. Eating locally produced food reduces 'food miles' and the associated environmental impact of shipping food around the world. It supports local producers and also means that what we consume is fresher. 'Growing your own', if you can, is the ultimate in locally produced! Organic production works with nature to minimise the harm that agriculture can cause to the environment. Animal-friendly choices consider the welfare of animals that provide our meat, fish and other animal products. And Fair Trade is an important consideration for those foods that cannot be produced in this region of the world, some of which we would now regard as commonplace rather than luxuries, such as tea and coffee.

These principles, and the 'LOAF' acronym provide a helpful guide when we are shopping to enable us to make more sustainable and just choices. However, they do also bring to mind another justice issue, that of affordability. Even if we can and do 'grow our own', none of us can produce everything we need. So, when we go shopping, do we balk at the higher prices for organic or Fairtrade goods and think they are too expensive? We need to remember what that premium is for: for the care of the earth, for the health and biodiversity of God's creation, for the opportunity for families in poorer countries to educate their families and pay for healthcare – things we take for granted. So making those choices, even some of the time, will help.

Over the past seventy years, food in this country has become proportionately cheaper as the standard of living has risen. In the early 1950s, the average household spent 40% of its income on food. That had fallen to 20% by the mid-1980s and to 10% by the mid-2000s. The reasons for this are complex, and I don't wish to oversimplify, but food has become more affordable and we in turn have learned to expect cheap food. And yet, despite that, more people than ever are using food banks, many of them ordinary people like you and me who never expected to be in such a position but who have experienced some crisis that has tipped them over the edge. Despite food being more affordable and a much wider range being available, food remains an issue of justice in this country too.

Recent steep increases in food prices have come as a shock to many of us, but they hit poorer households hardest. We may all have cut back a bit, but for some the choices have been, and are, stark. 'Eating or heating' as was said last winter. That should not be a choice that anyone has to make, but especially in an affluent nation such as this.

Our New Testament reading today, from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, is about generosity. Paul says: 'God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly...'. He also reminds us that we have individual responsibility: 'Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.'

As I said earlier, Harvest Thanksgiving has traditionally also included sharing with those less fortunate. At this time of year, many churches partner with local foodbanks to provide for the most needy in their communities, as one way to respond to God's call to share his blessings generously and to play our small part in addressing the injustices in our society. Thank you for your generosity today to the work of the Highland Foodbank. As we give thanks for God's generosity to us, so we share what God has given to help others.

And as we give thanks, there is a further question we must also ask ourselves: what can we do differently as we move forward, for the good of the planet and to advance justice for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged both locally and across the world?

Our Season of Creation focus on justice should not be something that is now done and dusted for this year. Perhaps the LOAF acronym is something we can take forward when we do our shopping, giving thanks to God that we have the opportunity to make those choices – locally produced, organically grown, animal friendly, fairly traded – choices that benefit others and the earth as well as ourselves; choices that not everyone has.