

Readings for Harvest Thanksgiving

29th September 2024

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

Harvest Thanksgiving is the culmination of the Season of Creation that the church keeps from the beginning of September to the Feast of St Francis of Assisi, on 4th October. We know that human activity, whether ill-advised, ignorant or deliberate greed, and particularly that of those of us living in the northern hemisphere, has led to devastating impacts on creation. This season provides a specific opportunity to reflect on that, not just as human beings, but as Christians. What it certainly shouldn't mean is that our Christian response to creation is now done and dusted for another year, or will be after today. What God has entrusted us with is far too precious for that.

As the hymns says: ‘All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above. Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.’ The created world, of which we are but a part, is a gift from God in love. It is a gift that is not just to serve our purposes, to meet our needs, but a whole that is good, has value, is sacred in its own right. Today, is a particular opportunity to give thanks for the good gifts of God, but not the only one!

And as we give thanks, we offer gifts to others from our abundance so that, as our Harvest collect says: ‘none may hunger, none may thirst, and all may cherish the gifts of your [God’s] creation’. Of course, that is a good thing. But there should be more to our Harvest Thanksgiving than just donating and then feeling that we have done our bit. In our Gospel passage today, Jesus speaks of the need to look beyond the material bread, that meets our physical needs, to the bread that endures for eternal life.

A recent article in *The Church Times* spoke about churches involved in social action projects inadvertently condoning an unjust system. The context was slightly different, but the principal is relevant. The article quoted the Brazilian Catholic Archbishop Dom Helder Camara who famously said: ‘When I give bread to the poor, they call me

a saint. But when I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist.' There is a tension between charity and justice. Today, we are donating our harvest gifts to The Highland Foodbank. That's good, but it's the easy bit. The harder question is 'Why are foodbanks necessary in our society?'

Of course, poverty is not new. Jesus himself pointed out that we would always have the poor with us. But we live in a society where the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' continues to widen, in which more and more people struggle to find affordable housing, to pay their energy and other bills, to find consistent employment, to feed their families. By supporting foodbanks, it can be argued that we prop up a system in which injustice is perpetuated, in which the state has no incentive to address the underlying problems. I'm not suggesting that we don't give to the foodbank – it does important work in meeting the vital needs of vulnerable people. But I do think we should ask ourselves the hard questions: what we can do about the injustice that makes foodbanks and similar charities necessary? We all have some ability to do that, if only at the ballot box.

Further afield, we see the effects of climate change on the poorest and most vulnerable communities across the world. The global impact of our lifestyles means that what we choose to do, or not do, affects people we will never meet in far-away places. This too is an issue of injustice.

Our harvest gifts are important – they provide essential food, bread, for those in need. But, beyond that, perhaps one way in which we can follow Jesus' imperative work for the food that endures for eternal life is to do what we can to resolve the injustices that make our gifts ever more important, and to resolve to do better in our care for creation, reducing our over-consumption of God's gifts and reviewing our climate-damaging lifestyles.

And that leads me to a second aspect of our gifts – that of relationship. This is something I have been reflecting on in response to a book I have been reading. It's called *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by Robin Wall Kimmerer and was recommended to me by several people independently earlier this year. It's not a Christian book, but it contains wisdom that would certainly help us in following the ways of Jesus.

The author is from a native American family and, early in the book, she writes about the gift of wild strawberries – a gift of the earth – one of God's gifts of creation, we might say. She goes on to reflect on how the nature of an object is changed by how it comes to us – either as a gift or as a commodity. Considering a pair of socks, she writes that if she goes to buy a pair of socks in a shop, she might feel grateful to those contributing to their manufacture (including the sheep!), but there is no inherent obligation. They are a commodity and, once paid for, become her property. But if that same pair of socks were knitted by her grandmother and given to her as a gift, everything changes because a gift creates relationship between giver and receiver. So she would write a thank-you note, she would take care of them, she would wear them when her grandmother visited, even if she didn't like them! She will make a gift in return perhaps. A gift creates a bond between people.

That distinction between commodity and gift makes sense to me, even if I haven't always been as caring or grateful for gifts as I should have been ... there were those strangely orange-coloured tights a great-aunt used to send when I was a teenager... But then apply that to our harvest gifts. Do we think of ourselves as having some relationship with those who will receive our donations at the foodbank? Perhaps we should.

We don't know them of course, and we don't expect a thank-you note. But 'not knowing' is something that has concerned me for a long time because, in a broader sense there is a tendency not to care so much about those people, places and things we don't know.

Jesus was in the business of building relationships: with God, with one another and with all of creation. Jesus was and is the ultimate gift of love from God, and he calls us to live in community, a global community as well as local. We don't have to know the details of individuals or places to learn about their circumstances, the challenges that sections of our society face, the challenges that peoples across the world face, the damage that is being done to much of God's good creation. To learn is to build a sense of relationship that means we care about what happens to them.

So, thank you for your harvest generosity, and let us give thanks and praise to God for his love and his gifts. But let us also resolve to continue to work to fight injustice, to learn about the reality of our world and to build relationships that foster community and care for all of creation.