

2nd October 2011

Harvest

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

St D 8 & 10.45

2 Cor 9:6-end

Luke 12:16-30

In the name of God: creating, redeeming, life-giving. Amen.

‘A team of American researchers has shown that the risk of civil conflict in Africa rises by 30 per cent in any year after the rains fail. The shape of a country’s political institutions or the degree of ethnic division is not the issue; a failing harvest is the crucial factor. Worse, these parts of the world are particularly vulnerable to climate change, which, of course, they have not caused. The US researchers’ report concludes that it is the ‘cruellest of ironies that the poorest people in the world – in the region least able to deal with extreme weather – also look like potentially the biggest losers in the global climate change lottery.’ More conflict seems inevitable.’

Having seen what we have seen of the horrendous famine in the Horn of Africa and knowing that that is just one place of acute need in the world, these words quoted by Will Hutton in his book ‘*Them and us*’ are words I want to return to and which I hope we hold in our minds and prayers at this time.

Let us turn our thoughts to our first reading to begin with; that wonderful passage from Deuteronomy. As Moses gives the people of Israel the law – back in chapter 5 – so he goes on to spell out more of the promises of God and we hear this passage of the great promise of provision for the people. A people who have had so little will want for nothing; the land they’re going to enter is “a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey.” Even on a good day at Sainsbury’s they haven’t always got pomegranates. This is truly a picture of fullness, of blessing, of the generous gifts of God: they will lack nothing.

As we look around us today – both literally in this beautifully decorated church – and considering our larders, fridges and cupboards at home; the supermarkets at our fingertips (again quite literally for those who shop online); we too lack nothing.

So we too need to heed the words of verse 11: “Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God.” And verse 17 “Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God.”

The story is a familiar one: when times are tough, when we’re struggling, we turn to God. When times are good, when we don’t feel any need, we tend to forget God, and worse still, as a people we can begin even to create a story which claims all the achievements for ourselves; a story which leaves God out and gives us the glory. And even worse still, a story in which we deserve all we have and those who go without deserve their lot as well.

Jonathan Sacks, in his latest book, gives this warning from history:

‘When a society loses its religion it tends not to last very long thereafter. It discovers that having severed the ropes that moor its morality to something transcendent, all it has left is relativism, and relativism is incapable of defending anything, including itself. When a society loses its soul, it is about to lose its future.’

One of the first and best reasons for keeping harvest festival, even in an age when harvest can be all year round and we don’t bring as much fresh produce into the church as some might like; one of the best reasons is that we make a declaration each year that all that we have is gift: it is gift from God who is the giver – as the hymn reminds us - of all good things around us. We stop and we name this gift and grace and we give thanks: deep thanks for all the blessings of our lives.

Another good reason is this: that we give thanks for our luck, our fortune in being so blessed in all we enjoy. And the theology, the reality of this brute luck is often the bit the

West finds hardest to name, because our temptation is to begin to name it as part of our achievement. We are tempted to see the fruits we enjoy as purely the fruits of our own effort and hard work. And the more we see and name them this way the more we believe we deserve them and that others don't deserve them as much as us.

‘Then Jesus told them a parable: ‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly... he said “I will build larger barns...”’

We start naming the achievements of our efforts and our work, but how did our achievements begin? Presumably with the ‘achievement’ of our birth. And if we dare to bring God in here then we are in a very dark place indeed.

I don't need to take us back to the opening quotation to spell out the cycles of hardship and suffering that are the lot of those born in some of the poorest parts of our world; the brute luck which has given a child birth into – for example – southern Somalia today.

The second part of the gospel reading has Jesus giving us those wonderful words, so often and rightly depicted in many a church's stained glass, where he tells us to “Consider the lilies of the fields.” Jesus tells of how God knows what we need. Unfortunately the lectionary stops at verse 30, verse 31 goes on to state, “Instead, strive for God's kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.”

God knows our need and God has provided and entrusted us with the earth where there is ample provision for all. But we keep failing to strive for God's kingdom where these things will be shared amongst all and instead ‘build bigger barns’ for some whilst others go without.

In our second reading, from 2 Corinthians chapter 9, we are given some basic ‘God maths’.
Sow little = reap little

Sow lots = reap lots

If you'll forgive the pun – so far so good.

Then the maths go like this:

Give little = receive little

Give lots = receive lots

Bless = be blessed

It really is that simple. It begins with a world which God has provided and which is overflowing with so much goodness – whether or not you like pomegranates. God has provided. Our part is not to build bigger barns but to understand that simple maths which we will discover is true as we put it into practice day by day:

Give little = receive little

Give lots = receive lots

Bless – be blessed.

We're in an economic time which is and will increasingly remind us of the need for simpler living and that building bigger barns is not the way forward. We're living in times where the need to remember God and God's provision and gifts is increasingly vital; and a time when we need stop for the harvest; to give thanks to God for his goodness; and to share that goodness in thankfulness and generosity.

So be it.

Amen.