

Talk at Harvest Thanksgiving, St Peter & St Paul, 18.9.11

Why celebrate harvest?

It may seem like a strange question, since we've always done it & harvest thanksgiving is one key events in our calendar.

But "why" celebrate harvest today – when so much about the world has changed - & there is as much to worry about (in our global economy & especially the 3rd world, including the horn of Africa), as there is to be thankful for?

Some of us will have strong memories of how harvest was celebrated in past: a real community event, an opportunity to celebrate – when the harvest had been gathered in - to decorate the church, sing hymns & thank God for his bounty. [And wasn't the barn dance, last night, wonderful?!]

"Come you thankful people come
Raise the song of harvest home
Fruits & crops are gathered in
Safe before the storms begin"

It's not difficult to trip down memory lane! But hasn't the world changed.....

- Most of us today, even in a beautiful village like this one, live at a distance from the land & farming.
- Most of us, unless we're blessed with large veg plots, don't rely on our own crops, but on supermarkets – part of a global supply chain.
- & The moral principles which used to govern the link between work & reward, and between economy & social justice, seem to have broken down. The fruits of the earth, it seems, are no longer enjoyed by everyone.

How do we celebrate harvest today?

And yet celebrate & give thanks we do, because we sense (deep down) that the v act of ceasing from work, to thank God for his gifts – the fruits of the earth, growth & life & belonging together – really matters. +It also provides a space to reflect on our relationship (in a changed world) with the environment (our mother earth), as well as with work, economy & wealth.

Why celebrate harvest?

Yet when we read our Gospel today, it's not hard to wonder what Jesus is really getting at - & whether his words are really (after all) relevant to an age like ours... Listen to what he says:

"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."

Do not be anxious, Jesus seems to be saying, in response to his parable of the rich fool – who stores up for himself, but is not rich towards God. Do not be anxious, for my Father will provide for those who trust in Him. And remember always, Paul adds, to live generously, for:

“the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” for “God loves a cheerful giver”

But the question is, do we really believe it – that such faith makes a difference to our wellbeing - & do we dare to put it into practice? And how is all this relevant to the everyday pressures of society today: making a living, protecting our savings & coping with life when the work dries up & we find ourselves reliant on other people?

“Therefore do not worry, saying ‘what will we eat?’ or ‘what will we drink?’ or ‘what will we wear?’ [its says in Matthew’s version] Indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God & his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

I want to suggest this morning something radical: that ‘thanksgiving’ & ‘generosity’ is far more important than we realise, and indeed if we practice it whole-heartedly (not just at Harvest, but throughout the year) it’s life-changing... & in doing this, I want to contrast two different ways of living & suggest that Jesus calls each one of us to conversion (to a change of heart): to shift from one to the other.

Think of how most of us normally live, most of the time. There’s our work – our income, if we have one, the money we spend (influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by advertising) – and our leisure: how we seek to relax or re-balance our lives. Nothing wrong with that, surely?

And yet we live in a consumer society, whose assumptions (whether consciously or unconsciously) are at odds with the Gospel. When Jesus says, “Don’t worry” ‘enough is enough’ ‘you play your part & I will provide’, the marketplace tells us that ‘there’s never enough’ & you should constantly worry about what you will eat or drink or wear & whether your future is secure, or someone’s going to take it away from you.

It’s not that there’s anything wrong with food & drink & clothing or indeed with hard earned wealth – after all we would be in trouble without them, and when God made the world (it says in Genesis) that God saw that it was good & to be enjoyed. No, there is nothing wrong with material things in themselves, but they will **not** provide us with ultimate value or the “good life” that we seek after – only God does that. And without God & His values of generosity & trust & faithfulness, it may always elude us.

When we think about the “good life” today, asks the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his book ‘The Dignity of Difference’, we seem to be looking in the wrong direction.

“Increasingly” he says, “we have moved to talking about efficiency (how to get what you want) & therapy (how not to feel bad about it). [But] What is common to both is that they have more to do with marketing than with morality.”

However hard we look to the market mentality for answers to our deeper questions about life & meaning, we will not find them there.

Not that the Market is bad or failing to do its job, because we need the market to survive, but it's just that the market is the wrong place to look for answers about what really matters.

So I want to suggest that in place of a way of living that links work & income merely with leisure (one defined, that is, by the market alone & our individual need); Jesus calls us to something much more exciting & real – and thanksgiving is the route to getting us there, the missing link in discovering true spiritual abundance.

So why is 'thanksgiving' so important?

- From the earliest times in the Old Testament, festivals of thanksgiving (like harvest) were given to remind people of where their life truly came from... that God (& the Spirit & Creation), is the giver of all good gifts.
- Secondly, this was connected to "Sabbath", the law laying down that every seven days we must cease from our labour – laying down our tools – in order to rest, to worship & to restore right relationships, with God, our-selves, with the natural world & other human beings.
- But there's more to thanksgiving today (even than this) for when we stop, to recover our being, to breath deeply, to listen & to give thanks, we are actually engaging in a profoundly subversive act.

For in place of a mindset that says we must always consume or be busy earning our place in the world... in stopping to give thanks, we restore a far deeper insight: that in Christ, we already have everything we need, that the earth is given for all, and in sharing together, we discover that there is (or should be) enough for everyone.

So thanksgiving, including harvest thanksgiving, provides the missing link between our work & our leisure. It opens up – in a consumer age - the gifts of faith & value & gracious abundance.

It paves way for true freedom & transformation, as we are changed (by Christ) to live from the heart & become more generous. And this is why the communion service, the great sacrament of thanksgiving, is so significant, because it reminds us that here, as we offer food & drink back to God, he blesses it & fills us with his love: that wellspring of grace & freedom & abundance that will never run dry.

Live simply, that others may simply live.

Do not worry about your life... for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Give & it will be give to you, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you receive.

& Remember always to give thanks to the Lord & trust him with all your heart, for he is gracious & his mercy endures forever. Amen