

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Harvest Thanksgiving – 11th October 2020

Reflection

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It feels somewhat easier preaching about Harvest Thanksgiving here in the Luberon, where the fruits of the earth are visible all around us, than in my previous urban setting. The church itself was in the middle of a four-lane one way system in the centre of London. People understandably asked me what sense it made to talk there about Harvest Thanksgiving.

The celebration of Harvest Festival in the Church of England was a nineteenth century revival of an earlier tradition – Lammastide (the so-called Loaf Mass), when the first wheat of the harvest was offered to the parish church to make into Communion bread. By the mid nineteenth century the impact of the industrial revolution was being felt across the country, and the church was keen to reconnect with an earlier agricultural way of life, where the source of daily bread was closely linked to the land. It was also intended to reassure a changing society that the God who had cared for generations past would continue to care for a current generation undergoing great change.

This year we have learned a lot about change, more than any of us would have wished. It is easy to think of the ways in which the pandemic has affected us all

personally. All the weddings we would have celebrated in the chaplaincy this year have had to be postponed, along with most of the travel, much of the meeting of family and friends, let alone the devastating effects on businesses, employment and every kind of human interaction that we have taken for granted throughout our lives. Yet we are called to remain steadfast, trusting (like our forebears) that the God who has cared for generations past will continue to hold our own generation in his care as we come to terms with great change.

If we look at the Psalms, we find echoes of our sense of dislocation writ large. Many of them date from the time when the remnant of Israel (some five hundred people out of a whole nation) were exiled in Babylon, by whose waters they sat down and wept. Taunted by their captors to sing one of their songs, they cried out: 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (Psalm 137). How do we celebrate what should be a joyful Harvest Thanksgiving in the middle of a pandemic? What the psalmists discovered was that, by retelling the story of God's past faithfulness, they would find comfort in their troubles, a resource for trust in the present and hope for the future.

The origin of Harvest Festival is in fact much older than the Loaf Mass. In the Book of Deuteronomy, from which our Old Testament reading came today, Moses instructed the people of Israel to offer to God the first fruits of the harvest, setting a basket down before the altar in gratitude for their release from slavery into a land flowing with milk and honey. It's why, traditionally, people brought produce to the Harvest service. Nowadays that often translates into gifts of food for those in need, and it is poignant to see them placed before the altar of God more than two and a half thousand years after Moses made his request.

What both the Book of Deuteronomy and the notion of Harvest Festival emphasise is the importance of living thankfully before God. That's why we call it a Harvest Thanksgiving. If we can focus more on what we do have rather than on what we don't, it helps us live less anxious lives. That's also the message of the second part of our Gospel reading this morning, when Jesus urges his followers to consider the lilies, the birds of the air. One thing the pandemic has taught us - those of us who have not been working on the front line of the crisis but have had the luxury of time on our hands - is how to stop and contemplate, to slow down, to calm our restless movement. And it has been beneficial, for us as humans and for the planet. It is even being described as a Jubilee for the Earth – an unexpected reprieve in our relentless over-exploitation of its resources.

Living thankfully, like keeping Harvest Festival, reminds us of the vital balance that lies both at the heart of creation and in human belonging. If we could become more aware of our responsibility to those who lack the basics for survival, if we could begin to treat food security as the urgent problem that it is becoming worldwide, if we could learn how to care properly for the planet entrusted to us, then we would learn again the truth that we are interdependent, and at the same time ultimately dependent on God, the creator of all. And then we could begin to live our lives accordingly. That's a timely reminder when we are engaged in a battle against a virus in company with the whole of humanity, in the context of our care for the Earth.

By contrast, the first part of our Gospel today tells a different story. Jesus's parable of the rich man is full of irony. We are told that the man is rich before the story begins, so he doesn't actually need the bumper harvest. It is the land which

produces abundantly, so he arguably doesn't deserve it either. He has a conversation about what to do, but he has it with himself because there appears to be no one else in his life. He finds a logistical solution – building bigger barns – and that insulates him further from others and from God. He anticipates having a party, but there is no one to have it with. It is a parody of heaven – there is no God, no companions, and no eternity – but it is presented as a party. Then the last scene is a reverse of the first. The first scene is about plenty, the last about isolation. The rich man dies, and is buried with the key to his barns. He has tried to insulate himself from death, but has actually insulated himself from life.

On one level it is a moral tale, a reminder not to hoard our harvests but to be generous towards others by being 'rich towards God'. On another level, the point of the parable is that it tells us what God is like and who God is. God is rich, but God is also generous. God does not invest in bigger barns, but in the precariousness of relationship. Whereas the rich man thought he had the security of barns, God takes the huge risk of investing in us, and we are called to follow. The question we are left with is: what are we going to do with the abundance we have been given? Hoard it away, or share it as abundantly as God does? Which brings us back to Deuteronomy: '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.'

Well, a chaplain *would* quote that, wouldn't he, on the day members of the Luberon congregation are being invited to renew their stewardship! And (silently thanking the compilers of the Lectionary) he would go on to quote from the Epistle, in which Paul says to the church in Corinth: 'The point is this: 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.'

Sharing God's abundance. That's what we are called to do, in every aspect of our lives – in our caring for others, in our giving to those in need, in our attitude to our friendships and our loved ones, in every encounter of our daily lives. Winston Churchill once said that human beings might make a living by what they earn, but that they make a life by what they give. It is one of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God that the things that matter most – love, relationship, connection, trust, wisdom – increase as they are shared. The more you give of these, the more you have. The gift of our harvest collections seems so small. But so were the five loaves and two fish, and look what happened to them.

So if someone asks you what you were doing this morning, celebrating Harvest Thanksgiving in the middle of a pandemic, you could tell them you were reaffirming our interdependence as humans and our ultimate dependence on God. In fact, doing what Jesus asked us to do: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves.

Amen.