

Harvest Festival 1st Oct 2023

I am the Bread of Life says Jesus, and indeed He is, certainly in the sense of Jesus being the way to fullness of life in all its senses. But, of course, this being our Harvest Festival, we are also very aware of the importance of physical bread, the sort that we need to help us stay alive. Fortunately, we have a beautiful loaf here, along with all the other gifts that will soon go off to St Catherine's in Edinburgh to help feed the homeless. Thank you to all those who have helped to make the church look so good this morning and especially to Carol for organising both this and the brunch that follows.

As well as it being Harvest Festival, today also marks the end of the Creation Season, which concludes on the Sunday nearest to the Feast of St Francis of Assisi, which falls on Wednesday. St Francis's love of creation is well known and of course creation and harvest are closely linked. The healthier creation is, the better the harvest will be. While British harvests haven't yet been too badly affected by climate change, that isn't true of everywhere with extreme heat, fires and floods all making farmers' lives very difficult.

Our Deuteronomy reading tells us that the Israelites were to offer the very best of their harvest to God in their own annual Harvest Festival. Of course, in those days Israel was almost entirely an agricultural economy so that made sense. Nowadays farming accounts for less than 1% of GDP and employs fewer than half a million people, so we live in a very different type of economy, but of course modern technology and modern animal medicines mean we can do more with less.

Living in a rural economy as we do here in West Linton, in the last few weeks it's been hard to miss the tractors whizzing around as harvest has been going full pelt. But to get to that stage we first needed the preparation of the fields, the seed, the drilling as well as the natural elements of sun, rain and wind to encourage growth.

Each year the weather brings it own challenges and you can never tell from year to year whether the next one is going to be a bumper one or a disastrous one or just a plain average one.

Of course, we have got used to being able to buy whatever food takes our fancy whenever we want, and that makes us dependent on harvests in other countries. But whenever there is a major disruption to production such as floods, monsoons, earthquakes and even war, then suddenly hundreds of millions of people around the world struggle to get enough food on their table to feed their family. As it is, more than 800 million people, or 10% of the world's population, were estimated to be affected by hunger in 2021.

There are things we can do to help ourselves, which would benefit creation. We can shop more locally, by which I mean focusing more on seasonal fruit and vegetables. As it says in Acts 14, God has shown us kindness by giving us crops 'in their season'. Do we need to have those seasonal fruit and vegetables such as French beans or strawberries that we can grow here in Britain available all year round? Think of the air miles and sea miles and therefore CO₂ emissions that can be saved.

And also the way we farm. One of the films that made a huge impression on me was *The Biggest Little Farm* and I thoroughly recommend it if you get a chance to see it, probably via a streaming service or on DVD. Yes, it's set in California, which most of the time has wonderful weather for growing fruit and veg, but the point of the film was that by working in harmony with nature, the young couple, who had never farmed before, were able to turn land that was virtually a dustbowl into very productive land in only seven years without using chemical fertilisers and improve it to the point where the soil, unlike on neighbouring farms, could cope with what might be termed biblical levels of rain without being washed away.

And we are beginning to realise that ripping out hedgerows to create larger fields to make it easier to grow crops, is actually counter-productive because of the loss of biodiversity. Thankfully, we are also paying more attention to animal welfare, but dare I suggest that we also need to wean ourselves off our obsession with cheap food. If we want farmers to work more in harmony with nature they need to be paid more for their produce so that they don't have to drain the last bit of goodness from their land to make a living.

But to harvest we first have to sow and while that is obviously true for a food harvest it is equally true for a spiritual harvest. And we know from the parable of the sower that as far as a spiritual harvest is concerned that we are called to be generous sowers and leave the germination to God. As Paul says so clearly in our New Testament reading when we sow generously we reap generously, and of course the opposite is also true. When we sow sparingly we reap sparingly.

And think how generous God is to us. Cut open a melon or a marrow for example and you will find literally hundreds of seeds that can be used to grow yet more in the right conditions. What a gift. What we have to do is to think how we can use the gifts we have been given as individuals to contribute to God's harvest.

And, of course, there is a huge difference between an agricultural harvest and a spiritual harvest that we mustn't forget. Whether it's meat or fish or vegetables or pasta or breakfast or lunch or supper, we are hungry again in just a few hours.

But as I said at the start Jesus tells us that He is the Bread of Life and that when we eat His Bread we need never go hungry, because then we are connected to the divine. Connected to what really matters in life, an understanding that just as creation is precious, so are we. And just as that is true for us, so it is for those who don't yet know God, don't know Jesus, don't know the Holy Spirit.

The context of Jesus' comment is important. It comes after he had fed the 5,000 and now the crowds were looking for another miracle. But Jesus was saying the miracles themselves weren't the point. He was the point. You may want more signs and wonders but what you need is me, he is saying. A big difference. Sadly, all too often what we need is the last thing we look for.

Which is why we are called to make disciples of all nations so that everyone can grasp how precious and loved they are. Which is why we are called to sow generously without worrying too much about whether it falls on rocky ground or on fertile ground. Our mission ground is outside the Church. Changes in society means we need to think how to engage with people for whom church is unfamiliar or irrelevant. How do they see us put our faith into action?

One way of putting our faith into action is to be more careful with creation. We are not free to do what we want with creation, and now we are seeing the effects of our rather arrogant past assumptions as to how we can treat it. No wonder Paul tells us elsewhere in his letters of the need for humility, as indeed did Micah when he said that what God really loves is when we walk humbly with God.

In conclusion, as I was preparing this sermon I read about a church in Manchester where, as the congregation enters the chancel to take Communion, over the arch are the words "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest". That great invitation calls us to the Lord's table, to receive the bread of life. But as those worshippers return back to their seat, returning down the chancel they see on the other side of the arch the words of the Great Commission: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature".

Jesus is the bread of life; he shares himself with us, and then bids us go to share him with others. Let us pray this harvest-tide for the grace both to respond to the great invitation, and to carry out the

great commission, so that the Living bread may bring life to the world.