

Harvest 2010

John 6.25-35

There is an old story about a traveller getting lost in Ireland. He found himself in a small village and stopped at the local pub for directions.

“How do I get to Limerick?” the traveller asked.

“Well” came the reply, “If I was going to Limerick, I sure wouldn’t be starting from here.”

Jesus had a great knack of taking people from the familiar to the new; from the hum drum of daily life to great spiritual realities.

Today we celebrate harvest.

On the one hand, harvest is a familiar celebration, rooted in every-day life – in farming, in the gathering in of crops and feasting, in giving thanks for all that we have and enjoy.

Yet on the other, it points us to much greater spiritual realities.

Even before Jesus starting drawing spiritual lessons from agricultural images, food and spirituality had been intertwined in the lives of God’s people.

Each of the three major Jewish festivals combined the two:

Passover and the feast of unleavened bread, celebrating Israel’s release from captivity in Egypt, came at the start of the corn harvest, and grain offerings were offered to God.

The feast of Tabernacles celebrated God’s provision for his people as they dwelt in tents (tabernacles) in the desert, and also celebrated the ingathering of the fruits of the land.

Pentecost was a type of harvest festival, but linked to the care of the Temple.

God’s people, then, have always recognised that good weather, the growth of crops, a good harvest, were gifts from God, and that it was right to give him due thanks and praise.

Psalm 145 says:

“The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing...

My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord

and all flesh will bless his name for ever and ever.”

Alongside this recognition of all good things coming from God, there has always been an understanding that there is an obligation upon those who have plenty to care for those less fortunate.

Many of the laws in the Pentateuch are designed to ensure the needy and vulnerable are not forgotten.

Leviticus 19.9-10:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bear or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and alien. I am the Lord your God.”

Hence, Ruth was quite within her rights to gather grain from behind the workers, and Jesus’ disciples to pick ears of grain from around the edge of a field.

In our day and age when we hear of farmers ploughing good crops back into the ground because the big supermarkets will not even meet the cost price of producing the crop,

In our day and age when billions of people live not knowing where their next meal is coming from, or without access to clean water, or with their children dying of preventable diseases, well we need to listen to the God who says,

“O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you,
But to do justice, and to love kindness
And to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6.8)

Simply to continue, unthinkingly, to shop in the same way, to bank at the same banks, invest in the same companies is simply no longer an option for those of us who follow Jesus.

However, the lessons to learn from harvest are, as I’ve said, not to be limited simply to giving thanks and the care of others.

Jesus was quick to draw lessons from the world of agriculture – a familiar world to the rural communities to whom he preached.

Most obviously we might think of the parable of the sower – Jesus’ invitation to think about our receptivity to God’s Word (Matthew 13.3-8&18-23)

Equally we might ponder the parable of the wheat and tares – as Jesus tells us that the righteous, or sons of the kingdom, will be gathered safely into God’s heavenly barn whilst all who do evil will be burned as chaff (Matthew 13.24-30&36-43)

Or the parable of the rich farmer who failed to be generous to God (Luke 12.16-21)

Or Jesus’ comparisons of the kingdom of God to a small mustard seed that grows into a great plant (Luke 13.18-19)

We might equally ponder Jesus' injunction to remain in him and be fruitful as the branches remain grafted into the vine and produce much fruit (John 15)

Today's gospel reading finds Jesus on the shore of Lake Galilee. He has just fed the 5000 and is now in dialogue with the crowd about the spiritual significance of this great miracle.

The crowd are struggling to see beyond Jesus filling their stomachs (John 6.26) but Jesus wants to point them to a greater spiritual reality:

That he is the bread of life, and that whoever comes to him will never be hungry, and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty (vs35).

On the way to telling them this, he makes the outrageous claim that the work God requires of every human being is to believe in him (vs29).

Bread was so crucial in Jesus day.
Indeed, it still is to us today, isn't it?

Bread can fill our stomachs and prevent us from hunger.
It satisfies us and brings us fulfilment.
It gives energy to enliven us, and enable us to work.
At its most basic, it staves of starvation and gives us life.

Jesus' claim was that he could, and would, do these things for all who would do God's work of believing in him.

It's interesting, isn't it, that there is no account in John's Gospel of Jesus instituting Communion.

Matthew, Mark and Luke (the Synoptic Gospels) all carry accounts of Jesus taking bread and wine and giving it to his disciples and telling them to eat and drink in remembrance of him.

But John chooses to omit this great event, recording instead Jesus 'bread' comments here in John 6.

Why?

Possibly, at least in part, to make the point that Christians don't just feed on Christ at the Communion, but continually in their hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

Hence the useful reminder in our Communion service to "eat and drink in remembrance that Christ died for thee and feed on him in your heart, by faith, with thanksgiving".

So, perhaps as we come to celebrate Harvest this year, we might do so, not just in thankfulness for the material blessings God has given us – great though these are, but also with thankfulness that God has given us so many spiritual blessings too.

For as he feeds us with wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart (Psalm 104.15) so he feeds us with the food that endures to eternal life (John 6.27)