

Harvest Sermon

Good morning, it's harvest; a day when tradition has us celebrating a harvest that has been safely gathered in. A good harvest like this year brings the prospect of a winter with food in our bellies and enough for seed to plant next year. The cycle of the seasons continues to entwine the lives of those who live on the land with creation itself.

But how has service changed?

The rhythm of our lives is no longer driven by the seasons; with electricity, our days are no longer governed by sunrise and sunset, and with global markets, seasonal foods have become a choice rather than a given.

When we think of harvest today we need to look at how our world has changed since the times of the Deuteronomy reading we heard.

Of course that doesn't mean that we don't have a harvest, we just need to think about it in a different way. Harvest is a celebration of the bountiful gifts of God's earth, and while that traditionally means the fields around us, fields we are so aware of here, it is no less a harvest time in a city centre. In centuries gone by, the harvest was the fundamental economic element; today that element is now the weekly wage, the monthly salary.

We can still celebrate harvest, in rural areas it is easy to celebrate in the traditional way, but we can also celebrate in a bigger, broader way by giving thanks for a harvest of the abundant gifts that God has given each of us. Gifts that enable us to live our lives in the way we do today...

Our harvest, for example, may be the income we have every month, the income that means we can now go along to a supermarket and buy our food instead of digging our gardens, gathering the eggs and slaughtering the animals. But how do we translate the Old Testament laws about gleanings, those ears of corn fallen on the ground but not taken up in the harvest but left for the poor and the strangers? It would be poor pickings indeed in these days of combine harvesters, so what do we do instead?

Gleaning was a law that ensured that at each harvest a portion was set aside for the poor, for the stranger that came to the area, the homeless.

What happens now?

Well, of course those of us who pay taxes now or have in the past have had their gleanings removed at source. It's called PAYE! It funds the NHS and the welfare system amongst other things, and it would be very easy to sit there and think, I've paid my taxes, I've done my bit...and indeed that would be alright if we had just what we needed; if we all had just enough, but we don't do we?

Luke's gospel reminds us that we should use what we need and share, not stack it in a barn. Now, obviously, planning for our future, for our retirement

and so on are worthy activities but what about on a day to day basis, are we really sure we need it all?

Some of us, perhaps most of us, have an abundance of something in our life. This is where we fit with the Luke reading, perhaps it would be fine to have a life that consisted of abundance if everyone else was the same, but we know that that just isn't the case. We all know that there are people who fall between the cracks in the state benefit system. I'm sure we all appreciate now that each of us could very easily find ourselves in a situation that means we cannot manage without help.

Years ago, I think there was a feeling that people who were homeless and jobless only had themselves to blame. But I think the perceptions have changed now, especially since the credit crunch.

It is at times like this that shelters and food banks become so important to those who are struggling on a day-to-day basis, those who have fallen on difficult times.

Like Tom...

Tom was a businessman, he had a good life, a wife and daughter, a big house and a golf club membership...life was good...

He worked long hours; business lunches and corporate entertainment were a large part of the networking involved. Long lunches and dinners also involved a lot of alcohol and he just didn't notice the creep, the increase in drinking and the drop off at work...until he lost his job...

Things were already becoming difficult at home with his wife and with no job he couldn't meet the mortgage repayments...then his wife asked him to leave...

His whole world had disintegrated.

He had lost his family, his home and his job...

Then there is Joe

Joe had been in the army since he left school, the army was his life. His mates were army, his work was the army, and his home was with the army. He had done three tours, one in Iraq and two in Afghanistan and although he came through them ok, he lost some mates...

When he left and went into civvie street, he found it really hard...

Nothing seemed real, important, no one seemed to understand...

He kept having a few drinks, he got involved in a few tussles, nothing serious, but enough to get a name, they were just misunderstandings really....

He had been couch surfing, he needed to move on; his mates needed him to move on...

He hasn't got an address; he doesn't know where his next bed will be...

This year we are supporting the Old Tea Warehouse in High Wycombe. It is a place where men and a few women can get back onto their feet, they have a

place to stay, they can look for work, apply for benefits, get help and advice. It isn't an easy option, it has a zero tolerance policy for drugs and alcohol, but it offers support and more importantly hope, to those who have found themselves on the street, in some cases without really having time to understand the changes that have taken place in their lives.

Now I am not suggesting for a moment that all the clients at the Warehouse are respectable, hardworking people who have lost their way, there are of course ex offenders and those with histories of drug and alcohol abuse.

But does it make any difference?

Should it make any difference?

If Christ were here today would he be visiting someone in Great Missenden, in a cosy semi detached house with off road parking, or would he be in High Wycombe, where the lost and the homeless are waiting for a place in the Old Tea Warehouse?

Our gleanings can have a huge impact on someone's life, the welcome pack of toiletries and basic foods give them a head start, time to get themselves organised, to make themselves feel human again.

The staff there have a high turnover, despite the support they are given, the work can be exhausting and the results variable. It is hard and often unrewarding work, and yet they do it, and our gleanings, the physical and spiritual support we send, reminds them that they are thought of and prayed for and that they are valued for the work they do.

The second charity we are supporting is the Chesham Food bank. Again it is a sad reflection on our society that a food bank is needed, but needed it is. People from all backgrounds can find that they just do not have enough to buy food for the family. Needing food bank vouchers can have absolutely no reflection on where they live and what they do. Those of you who are familiar with that cutting edge programme of social commentary, the Archers, may remember that Emma had to resort to the food bank.

Someone living in a large comfortable house may still be cash poor and struggling to make ends meet...sell the house, downsize I hear you think... but what if HS2 comes close, what if the house has been on the market for a year with no takers?

More to the point, it is not for us to judge...

Both of these charities provide support and practical help, but they also provide a friendly face, a place to talk and a way of building relationships, reducing the isolation and showing compassion.

Until 1788 gleaning was still an accepted practise until a court case where a wealthy landowner sued a woman for trespass and ended a tradition that had been around since biblical times.

Perhaps it is time to think about how we use our wealth, our abundance. Perhaps it is time to bring the practise of gleaning back into society, a time when we look at the abundance we have and think no, I can leave some of this for others, a beginning of sharing what we have with those who haven't, both locally and on a global scale.

If you would like to be involved with the ongoing support of either of these charities, please contact Wendy in the office.