



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist for Harvest

Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: [Haggai 1.2-11](#), [1 Timothy 6.6-10](#), [Luke 12.13-21](#)

22 September 2024

Perhaps it was a bad idea to go on holiday! I came back from two weeks away and went up to the allotment yesterday to check my crops. The cold nights you had here the other week finished off my French beans completely and took out nearly all my courgettes. The outdoor tomatoes had succumbed to blight and the patch of ground where I had planted 24 small lettuce plants to grow on over winter was completely bare. No sign of a plant at all...thank you slugs! So, harvest for me looks a bit paltry at the moment as three things came together to affect my harvest time: human action, weather and pest attack.

We call this event in our church calendar 'harvest celebration' but many of us understand harvest in an almost symbolic way. We aren't growers, we usually get our foodstuffs from retailers big and small. We may see poor harvests reflected in higher prices, but we are not generally looking at the weather forecast with frustration or battling an onslaught of pests we cannot control. I am a play farmer, I won't go hungry because of the combination this year of a cold spring and endless rain, which reduced plant growth, or this latest setback.

My harvest generally comes from the income I receive from work and pension, like most of you I imagine. And yet even then there are shocks and discrepancies. A sudden loss of employment or illness can result in harvest loss for us. Higher prices challenge those whose harvest from their life's work is poorly paid whilst others, more skilled, or often just more lucky, weather them without noticing.

We often see harvest as the normal outcome of a series of other actions: planting, nurturing and then the gathering, but a successful harvest is for many also a matter of chance.

This harvest time Christian Aid is sharing news from Zimbabwe where currently the country is experiencing the worst drought it has seen for more than 40 years – brought about by El-Nino, the term which describes the unusual warming of surface waters in the eastern Pacific. Nyarai Zirugo is one of 27,000 smallholders to be helped by a programme supporting their agriculture to diversify their crops, drawing on neglected indigenous plants for food for themselves and for processing and sale, and then investing in different equipment or farming practices.

Global statistics tell us that there is food for all in our world, the problem is that it is out of reach of those who need it, either geographically or in price. So, the challenge to us who care about poverty and hunger is how to deal with scarcity at the local or international level. How can we institute 'harvest practices' that meet hunger with the resources needed, and are able to support affected individuals and communities as they try again?

Our scripture passages today speak to us of two harvests: a poor one and a bountiful one.

The prophet Haggai has some interesting words for his community about the lives they pursue while neglecting the one who delivered them from slavery and from whom they receive nature's collaboration

“You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.” This seems not so much to be a description of scarcity as one of consuming demand; a relentless pursuit of more of everything, which ends in waste and dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, the people, focussed as they are on their housing, their consumption and their desire are failing to recognise God’s work in their lives with thankfulness. God’s house is neglected, and his service ignored. There is a reckoning to come: in the face of such demand and exploitation the Lord warns that nature is going to refuse to co-operate. “The heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce.”

It is hard to ignore the resonance when we know that many harvests are failing because of overuse of the land’s resources, deforestation and abuse of water sources and, of course, our changing climate, which has left previously competent growers unable to produce or even know (such is the erratic nature of their weather) when it is best to plant. As Nyarai says: “One of the main things we got was improved knowledge. We learnt how to put in place measures to prepare for unpredictable situations.”

A faithful response to this goes beyond charitable action whether it is for Zimbabwean farmers or Bishop Libby’s appeal for funds to support food banks and food projects in Derbyshire. It demands a determination to change the ways that have caused and are continuing to cause the problem; and perhaps we could start with cultivating in ourselves a generous thankfulness when we find we are materially blessed, a thankfulness that issues in support and not demonisation of those not so fortunate who need help. Then we could demand with integrity that leaders at all levels take the communal decisions that are beyond our individual capacity and model to us the wisdom of sustainable choices and decisions.

This passage from the book of Haggai is not heard in our church lectionary, but our Gospel reading is and gives us occasion to reflect on the story that Jesus told in answer to a question about an inheritance. He tells of a man-made wealthy by a series of good harvests. We learn what he does in response, he builds bigger barns tearing down the ones that no longer have the capacity to store his bounty. Now Jewish culture and faith would see this sort of prosperity as a blessing (many Christians are of the same persuasion) and of God’s favour, but this man is called a Fool and when he decides to celebrate the only guest who comes to the party is Death.

What has gone wrong here? If we read the passage closely, we can see some clues. Look at the number of times we hear ‘I.’ “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul: relax, eat, drink, be merry.” We could do a little imaginative work about how his harvest was achieved. He had land, seeds, equipment, and lots of labourers to bring the growing process to a successful conclusion, but we hear nothing of them. It is as though their contribution to his fortunate position is completely unrecognised. In fact, we could also imagine how his building projects drive him further away from the people amongst whom he lives, the bigger barns meaning more distance between himself and the rest of his community, many of whose circumstances might be less favourable.

And then being called a ‘fool’ lets us know that he has also neglected God and failed to show the right sort of thankfulness that would issue in grateful praise and be followed by the practical acts of service his faith required: the tithes for the priests and for the needy.

Our UK society has many rich farmers and equally many who are struggling to make a living from the land. The imbalance in their situation and in their resulting harvests is not entirely down to nature or climate but to policies shaped by Governments regarding agricultural support and international trade, and by our retailing economics that lock producers into contracts and pricing where the power lies with the purchaser and not the seller. Churches have supported the concept of Fairtrade for decades now in response to the unfair terms of trade imposed upon growers of crops like tea, coffee, sugar etc. in the global South. Perhaps it is time to inform ourselves again of how similar relationships can exist in our own country and explore how we can change them.

Our lunch today is particularly appropriate as it gives us a chance to critique, in community, the patterns of life we take for granted and encourage each other to act differently.

Social research often shows that a community or individual capacity for generosity and willingness to share decreases in times of scarcity; people get anxious about losing what they have. But is this rooted in the path that Western development has taken with its emphasis on individual responsibilities and private property? Many decades ago, a Latin American community worker shared with me the Peruvian indigenous practice of *Kwasay Huñuy* which communities devised in pre-conquest times and were continuing to practise when harvests were poor.

At harvest time those who were without were expected to lay down a poncho outside their home and to make a traditional drink which was offered to those who brought something from their better harvest to place on the poncho. Many would, contributing beans, maize, wheat, barley, beans, potatoes and often staying on to praise the liquor to others as an encouragement to share. It is called *The Levelling Feast* and is a community means of avoiding destitution for members. I like the fact that it is linked with a party vibe, which would seem to cultivate a sense of belonging and interdependence. They say; "today this is for you; tomorrow it may be for me." Perhaps if the Rich Fool had planned his party a little differently and encouraged those around him to bring their ponchos so that he might fill them, Death would not have called.

St Augustine criticised this man for storing up perishable goods in the face of his own mortality. He suggested that the best places to store abundance were the bellies of the poor.

When Jesus answered the question about a right to inherit, he told a story which challenged the questioner's ideas about entitlement and acquisition. If our traditional idea of harvest is one that many of us no longer experience, would it be too difficult for us to remake that idea to take in a broader understanding of what a modern harvest looks like and how it is acquired? This might mean taking account of the many who are excluded from the harvest they deserve and deliberately creating practices and relationships that draw our neighbours closer rather than pushing them and their needs away. Harvests might be gathered and shared around the seasons and not restricted to one time of the year.

We already have social structures that aim to do this but from the details we hear they often fail to effectively support people in need and are viewed with resentment by many who fear losing something of their own. Can we change that narrative? Celebrate harvest as a gift for all and look for the neighbour in need without judgement? Because today what we bring is for them, but tomorrow it might be for us.

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