

Morning Worship – Sunday 27th September – Harvest

Sermon – Rev Paul Day

Deuteronomy 8:7-18

Luke 12:22-30

A rich man was on walking by the sea shore one afternoon and noticed a fisherman lying in the sun dozing alongside his boat. ‘Why aren’t you fishing?’ he asked.

Because I have caught enough fish for the day – he replied

‘Why don’t you catch some more?’

‘What would I do with them?’

‘You could sell them and earn some more money. In time you could use that money to fix a motor to your boat. You could then go into deeper waters, and catch more fish and make enough money to buy better nets. That would bring more fish and more money – maybe enough to buy another boat – who knows – even a fleet of boats. Then you could be a rich man like me.

‘What would I do then?’

‘Then you could really enjoy life’

The fisherman looked up from where he was laying – What do you think I’m doing right now? He said

They say that if you ask a rich person how much money they would need to ensure they were happy, they would probably respond – just a little more than I have now. And maybe we would all give that same response.

And it’s not surprising, because all around us that message is being shouted and proclaimed. It’s the principle that underpins nearly all advertising. You just need this (whether it’s a new car, a new perfume or the dream holiday) to make you happy; to ensure you are fulfilled.

Our whole economic system is based on it too. Growth is the measure of success of our economy. And growth of the economy means growth in consuming which means ‘just a little bit more’ being the driving force. And this

soon leads to wealth becoming the goal of life. The rich, the ones who 'have' are seen to be those who are the successes, the ones the rest of us should look up to.

It's hard not to be drawn into the view that wealth is the key to happiness and contentment.

But as Christians is that the position we should hold?

In Paul's first letter to Timothy we read these words:

There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

Paul talks of the dangers, of the temptations in the pursuit of riches. How easy it is for riches to lure us away from God.

Instead he urges contentment. Look at what you have. Not just in terms of material possessions, but also friendships, abilities, faith. Look at these and be thankful.

In today's gospel reading Jesus stresses those same things. In fact he goes even further than Paul. Paul says if you have food and clothing be content with them; Jesus says don't worry about food or clothing – God knows your need of these things.

In the Old Testament we see that wealth was often seen as a sign of someone being blessed by God. For people like Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon (for example) their riches - their flocks and herds and other possessions – are shown as evidence of God blessing them and being with them. It's a theme that runs through much of the Old Testament. Material blessing comes from God to those who deserve it.

But that's not the whole story. There are passages like today's from Deuteronomy which declare very clearly that such wealth is not because of anything we have done, but is because of the generosity of God.

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, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.

The book of Job tells us of the struggles Job went through when all his possessions and material wealth was taken away from him. His so called friends try to convince him that he had done something wrong which meant he deserved the suffering. But in the end he learned the lesson that everything is God's and God can take away as well as give. We question God at our peril.

The Old Testament also teaches that the best way of recognising that everything comes from God is by offering back to him the first fruits. Not the bit that's left over when we have used and consumed, but the first fruits. The best and most precious part. Running throughout the Old Testament is the idea of the tithe – giving one tenth back to God as a recognition that everything we have comes from him. It is this that is the basis of our Harvest offerings.

Of course our Harvest offerings are very different from those in the agricultural culture of the Old Testament. But the idea is the same. We offer back to God something of what we have in recognition that everything we have comes from him in the first place.

For those who farm the land and are dependent on what the land produces, it is the Harvest time that is all important – it's Harvest that shows how generous God has been, so it's at Harvest that gifts that are offered.

For us, our income, our wealth comes in very different ways. Through monthly salaries or pensions, through weekly pay packets or benefits. So our thanks to him will be different too. If we receive our income monthly, then it makes sense for our gifts to him to be on a monthly basis too in recognition that all we receive comes from him. Whether it's a tithe or whatever is up to us to work out. The Church of England has for a long time suggested that Christians should consider giving 5% of our income. Not as "spend what you want and see if there's 5% left at the end", but like the first fruits. To make such giving the first call on our finances. Which means going about giving in a planned and systematic way.

Today we are celebrating our Harvest festival in Shirley Parish. Like everything else in 2020 it's a bit different this year. Although we are worshipping in church again, for most of us we will be celebrating Harvest in our homes, watching and taking part in the worship online or over the phone.

But perhaps home is the right place to be when we think about Harvest. When we think about giving God thanks for all that he has given us. For it is in our homes that we enjoy many of the benefits of God's generosity.

How we give God thanks – what we offer back to him - is an individual choice. The important thing is to recognise that he is the ultimate source of all we have and all we are.

We are asking this year – as we do most years – that we make a special effort at Harvest to remember the foodbank. It's important that we do so – especially at times like this when things are so hard for so many people. In the 4 months April – July 2019 the foodbank helped 2286 people; in the same period this year the number was 5478. More than double.

But it's also important that we consider our regular giving, our regular thanksgiving offerings. One of the areas that should be a high priority for Christians is giving to and through the church. To help maintain our worship, and also to extend what we do and how we continue to proclaim the gospel by word and deed in the parish. Again, this year has brought pressures on our finances that we could not foresee, so please do think about your offerings and how you might best make these in a thoughtful, prayerful and systematic way. Please have a word with one of the church treasurers who will be able to help you.

But our offerings should not finish there.

The wealth seeking culture in which we live is very much centred around ourselves. It is very individualistic. Jesus teaches a way of life that is community based. That sees everyone as our sisters and brothers. That sees all people as those who we should want to share things with and help. All we are and all we do should be a response to the love of God and his provision for us.

Although in the story I began with the fisherman was not seeking wealth, there is no evidence that he was seeking to be generous to others. Self centredness is not simply a problem for the wealthy. It's something we can all fall into. True

thanksgiving for God's gifts and generosity to us involves each one of us to be thoughtful of and generous to others.

So this Harvest festival – let's be thankful for all that God has given to us, and be ready and willing to share it with others as a mark of our thanks.