

The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

Sermon

Sunday 24 September 2023: Angela Hannafin

Good morning and welcome to our Sofa Sermon on the Sunday we celebrate Harvest in our parish. Our gospel reading today is from the book of Matthew.

For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work. ³ "At nine o'clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. ⁴ So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. ⁵ So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o'clock he did the same thing.

⁶ "At five o'clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, 'Why haven't you been working today?'

⁷ "They replied, 'Because no one hired us.'

"The landowner told them, 'Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.'

⁸ "That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. ⁹ When those hired at five o'clock were paid, each received a full day's wage. ¹⁰ When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day's wage. ¹¹ When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, ¹² 'Those people worked only one hour, and yet you've paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.'

¹³ "He answered one of them, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair! Didn't you agree to work all day for the usual wage? ¹⁴ Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. ¹⁵ Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?'

¹⁶ "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last."

Harvest for me growing up meant seeing a lot of tins. Tins being collected in school, tins being collected in church, tins in whatever social group you were part of. These were tins of food which wouldn't go off, so there were, no doubt, a few tins of Spam in there, Ambrosia Custard and Fray Bentos pies, as well as all the usual peas, beans and soups. I'm not always sure I understood what Harvest

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actually meant as a child, as it just seemed to be about tins. Nobody really explained it or if they did I wasn't listening (and I'm aware it could have been the latter). Nobody seemed to make a connection between the meaning of Harvest and the tins for me, so it just seemed like a Festival of Tins. I will be making sure that when I go into school the children know a little more than I did. Celebrating Harvest in a town when I grew up in the '70's is completely different to celebrating it in a village, where I now live. When we sing 'We Plough the Fields and Scatter' now, as we will do later, there are families in church who have done exactly that, who know the soil and seed. They know it's more than just a lot of tins.

Whether you are experiencing a Festival of Tins or offering different produce though, the purpose of Harvest is to express our thankfulness to God for everything he has done for us. King David said when the Temple was built, "Everything we have has come from you, and we give you only what you first gave us!" We can't ever out-give God because everything we have is his in the first place. Our lives, our breath, everything we own, Christians believe, has come from the hand of God. Of course it's our physical money in the bank, our cars on the drive, but how did you come to own all you do? God has blessed you with it. Incidentally, in that story King David decided that to show his gratefulness to God, by offering tons of gold and silver and asking the people to match his gifts. In response they offered 188 tons of gold, 10,000 gold coins, 375 tons of silver, 675 tons of bronze and 3,750 tons of iron. Scripture says they also contributed numerous precious stones, and the people rejoiced over the offerings, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord, and King David was filled with joy. But that's not enough, Scripture also says the next day they brought 1,000 bulls, 1,000 rams, and 1,000 male lambs as burnt offerings to the Lord. It's a bit like a wedding where all the presents just kept on coming the next day. Can you imagine a place big enough to house all their gifts?

But that was the response of God's people to the joy they felt at seeing the Temple of God built. It made them want to give back to God.

Christians are people living in the wake of God's generosity. Everything he has done we testify to; in other words, we are now witnesses to the goodness of God. This has culminated in the gift of his Son Jesus Christ to us, so that we can now live with God's Holy and life giving Spirit at the centre of our lives. The Spirit that moves us closer to God is now available to us, speaking to us daily so that over time we are changing and becoming more godly. We don't deserve that gift, because as Paul writes, "God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us". We still don't deserve to be God's friends,

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because we've never really wanted to match his generosity to us. However, that's not the issue for him. Because of his love for us, we can be reconciled with him and live as free people. There's a lot to be thankful for.

Our three scriptures today also testify to the goodness of God. The Old Testament reading described how God showed his mercy to the people of Nineveh because they listen to him and turned back to him. God also provided a shelter for Jonah, but all Jonah could do was whine to God about the injustice he felt. This is echoed in the parable in the gospel where all the workers received the same payment, despite having worked different hours. Those who have worked longer feel resentment, and yet the landowner asks why they are jealous that he might be kind to others. The mercy of God is available to all, those who have been 'good' and those who haven't. It can feel unfair, but we are worshipping a lavishly kind, faithful and merciful God who wants everyone to know him. It's better than a whole load of tins.

The origins of Harvest go back to Lammas, meaning 'Loaf Mass', which we celebrate on 1st August. In early Christianity, the first loaves of the season were blessed by the church during mass. Harvest has changed a lot for many parts of our country and our world and it has a different tone to it, I think perhaps less passive now. We are only too aware of the challenges facing the natural world and the work we need to do. "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" says Psalm 24. It's God's world and therefore our business to look after it. This week I watched Chris Packham on Channel 4 ask whether it's time to break the law in order for the climate crisis to advance. It's a really impactful programme and I recommend that you watch it if you haven't already. It makes me read Psalm 24 in a different way too, as a result.

I just want to finish today by playing Louis Armstrong's 'Wonderful World' and by doing this we're not blotting out the real issues of life around us. Economic hardship and the daily difficulties we all face are real and they don't just go away by playing a nice song. However, there is also reality in the beauty of our world, which God made, which he said to himself was good, and which he's now asked us to look after. So as we celebrate Harvest today, we celebrate life, we celebrate one another, we celebrate all that God has made and of course we celebrate God and his goodness to us. May you celebrate this day yourself. AMEN.