



**GRAY'S
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October 4th 2020

A Declaration of Dependence

Deuteronomy 8: 7-18 & Luke 12: 13-21

This sermon is about Harvest and about Covid. And it's about Control versus Relationship.

The celebration of Harvest Festival has come full circle. At one time it was a heart-felt thanksgiving that all had been "safely gathered in", earthed in a belief that the created world was a gift of God and we depended on powers beyond our control that seed-time and harvest would not fail. The Psalmist celebrated that "Thou visitest the earth, and blessest it : thou makest it very plenteous... Thou crownest the year with thy goodness". And when that failed the Book of Common Prayer provided Collects for a time of drought or of tempest.

But then science and technology took away that sense of dependence, and also its sense of wonder. We took too literally the invitation in the Book of Genesis to "dominate the earth and subdue it". We demanded the right to do what we liked with what belonged to us. Harvest Festival, if it played any role at all, became a piece a rural nostalgia.

Yet now we are beginning to appreciate the danger and the deficit which that has caused. We do not reject science and technology, for these too are gifts from God, but we see that being able to do something doesn't necessarily mean that it's right to do it.

What's now called this Season of Creation is about rediscovering a healthy dependence on nature and on each other. We accept that we have violated the natural world to the point where it may no longer be viable: the reduction of the ozone layer, the loss of bio-diversity, the melting of the polar ice-caps – we all know what's happening. And this Season of Creation also invites us to own up to our failure to share the good things of the earth, allowing economic systems to develop to the point that half of the world's wealth is now owned by just 1% of its population.

And suddenly the Christian message throws off the cobwebs of irrelevance, steps out of the shadows of nostalgia, and offers Hope. Because it sets these things in the context not of control but of relationship. Relationship with earth and relationship

with each other. The created order is not possession but gift. The invitation to dominate and subdue is about taking responsibility for what we have been given, to respect it and to use it, not as we would wish whatever the consequences, but as the Creator and Giver would want.

So we face crucial choices. And in this, as with everything else, God leaves that choice up to us. He does not control, but offers instead a relationship in which we might try to get all those other relationships in some sense sorted. When things go wrong with him he gives us the chance to stop and start again. But when it comes to our relationship with the natural world, have we left it too late? What chance is there that we can reject our adolescent demand for agency and independence and realise our dependence on creation and on each other?

The Coronavirus pandemic has raised equally difficult issues. In addition to the suffering and death it has caused, it has brought some disturbing things to the surface. We become fearful and frustrated when we lose our usual control. When our accustomed busyness and diversions are taken away, we can find ourselves facing the more fundamental questions which they have served to hide. The writer Arundhati Roy – you may know her novels “The Ministry of Utmost Happiness” or “The God of Small Things” – says that, besides being a virus, COVID is a X-ray: it has looked inside us and seen the fractures.

But again, can our Christian faith offer some hope. I think so, in two ways, and again replacing control with relationship. The first is our relationships with one another. How, when this terrible thing has been beaten or at least contained, how do we build back in ways that confront the poverty and growing inequality, here and around the world?

That’s about policy, and not returning to the hypocrisy of clapping Health and Care workers while cutting their budgets and paying some of them less than the Real Living Wage. But it’s deeper than that, it’s about discovering and celebrating our belonging together on this beautiful earth and how we share its resources.

In March, at the height of the pandemic, Pope Francis knelt in an empty Saint Peter’s Square, in the pouring rain, and prayed for the salvation of all. “In this storm,” the Pope said, “the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.” His next encyclical, ‘Fratelli Tutti’, “blessed is our common belonging”, is about fraternity and social friendship, about what makes us brothers and sisters.

So, our relationships with each other. And secondly, a deeper relationship as well. For the God who has chosen not to control but to invite offers to us that possibility of

relationship with him, in this life and the next. The virus may leave us feeling disturbed and disjointed, because we no longer feel in control. But maybe that is also an opportunity to depend less on ourselves and more on God.

In this life, and the next... The pandemic has raised for many people the final, often unspoken, thing over which we have no control – our death. Harvest also has that darker side, when it speaks of the last days and of judgement. We will need to answer for what we have done, including our abuse of creation and our failure to share this world which God has given us. But God is good, our God is forgiving, our God suffers with us, our God will not let us go, and it is in this that we trust, for ourselves and for those we love, that when we are no longer in any control, we fall into his arms.