

Joel 2 : 21-29 & 2 Corinthians 9: 6-end

Are you an owner-occupier, a lease-holder, or a tenant in a rented property? I refer not so much to your housing arrangements but to the way you see the world and your place in it.

Harvest festival, and giving thanks that all is now safely gathered in, comes from a time when the supply of food through the winter months was by no means guaranteed. Today, at least in the Western world, we take all of that for granted. No-one comes out of the Holborn M&S Food singing "Now thank we all our God". They are much more likely to be complaining that there's only one type of mangetout on sale. And we expect a choice of shops as well: Lidl and Aldi for the cost-conscious, TESCO in its Express and Extra forms, and Sainsburys. A friend of mine says that the main purpose of Sainsburys is to keep the riff-raff out of Waitrose.

Giving thanks for the harvest also portrays a frame of thought, an understanding of the world. Hence my question: are you an owner-occupier, a lease-holder, or a tenant in a rented property?

Since the Enlightenment we have tended to be the first – people who think we own the world and can do pretty much whatever we want with it. We have therefore lost some of the dimensions which our service this morning has contained.

We have lost a sense of Wonder, and therefore Worship: "The heavens are telling the glory of God – the wonder of his work".

We have lost the sense of Creation: not that God put it all together in six days but that it's the product of a loving, creative mind. Like a composer, a painter, a sculptor, God is the who has brought this world into being, out of nothing, as an act of love.

We have lost the sense of Gift: we are ourselves created beings but God has shared the rest of creation with us. We do not own world: at best we are hold it on a long lease.

And so we have lost the sense of responsibility, about how we use this gift, about being partners with God in a larger plan. We heard St Paul: “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” But so often we have abused what we have been given.

The consequences have of course been catastrophic, and maybe one day see the end of Harvest itself. The loss of species, the despoiling of the land, the pollution of our oceans by plastic, the threat caused by nuclear waste. And of course Climate Change: global warming, changing weather patterns, rising sea levels. And those who have contributed least to the causes of all of this will suffer most from its outcomes. Why are the churches in the Pacific, and in places like Bangladesh, so vocal about Global Warming? Because in a place like Fiji – and I’ve seen there at first-hand – it means not just loss of land for living and farming but the salination of the land which is left. It means people asking: how much longer will we be able to live here?

Climate Change is fundamentally a theological issue. Do we own the world? Or can we find a way of living together in a shared arrangement with the owner and each other? Can we find a way which will not leave those who come after us homeless?

And if those questions affect how we see and treat the natural world, they also apply to the way we organise our life together in society. Last month Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, put his head above the parapet in the IPPR report “Prosperity and Justice: A Plan for the New Economy”, which he helped to write, and then in his speech to the TUC Conference.

He was calling for greater equality, in power and wealth, and for much more to be done to reduce poverty. He attacked the Universal Credit welfare system, and Amazon’s tax affairs. He questioned the Austerity which arose from the 2007/8 Financial Crisis, pointing out that – as with global warming – those who contributed least to its cause are suffering the larger part of its consequences.

Some of the responses were predictable. When Christian leaders address such issues we are told “That’s all very well but these moral generalisations have to worked out in practical, feasible policies”. But when we do advocate

specific actions, we are told that the Church should not get involved in politics. And by politics they mean not seeking to uphold the status quo – that’s perfectly fine – but anything which seeks to change it. And the other criticism – “you people can’t really understand matters of economics” – hardly sticks with this Archbishop who was once a top executive in a global oil company.

The good news this morning is that the Archbishop will deliver the Mulligan Sermon here in this Chapel in April. The sermon is always about how should love our neighbour. Be prepared!

So, Harvest Festival....

A time to enjoy the wonder and beauty of Creation

A time to give thanks for all the good things of life

A time to acknowledge the Creator, and that we are also created beings

A time to see the world not as something we own, but as a gift

A time to ask how we are using and sharing the good things we have been given

And – sorry about this – also a time to remember that a sub-text of Harvest Festival is judgement, the final gathering-in, the Great Reaper who will separate the weeds from the wheat.

But let me not finish on a negative note. The good news of the Gospel is always God-with-us. A comfort I hope when life gets tough, a resource when there are difficult decisions to be made, and hope, real hope, for all our lives. I say that, aware that for some of you this is the beginning of what will be a very full and demanding year of study and training. And I say it for all of us, because together we can build world where everything is safely gathered in, and our harvest song need never end. Amen