

Reflection for Harvest Festival 2020

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The lectionary offers two Gospel passages for the Harvest Festival this year, and I chose the less "agricultural" one. At first glance the account of a healing from leprosy doesn't seem very harvest-y, but I was struck by the theme of giving thanks for what the Lord does for us, a theme that runs through all three readings, and while the provision of things to eat and drink is necessary that is only a fraction of what he gives to us.

The Old Testament reading is from the book of Deuteronomy, which is set just before the Israelites enter the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and which reviews many of the laws and regulations given in the preceding three books (Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers). Among these are instructions for three major annual festivals: Passover/Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) and the Feast of Tabernacles. The last two of these are harvest-related; the Feast of Weeks, held seven weeks after the start of Passover, celebrates the first-fruits of the harvest (the climate of the Middle East means that crops grow faster there than they do here!), while the Feast of Tabernacles, which is held around now, is timed for the end of the fruit and wine harvest and when all the wheat has been threshed, and is also a reminder of Israel's 40 nomadic tent-dwelling years. All the men of Israel were to meet wherever the Ark of the Covenant was resting (this was before the Temple was built), bringing an offering in proportion to how they had been blessed; in practice, a tenth of what their fields had produced. Some of this offering was to be given to the Lord (as a burnt offering, for example) but most of it was to be eaten by the people themselves in a celebratory feast. "Be joyful" they were instructed, and the joy and feasting (for seven days!) was to be celebrated by all the people, including the servants, the widows and orphans, and the foreigners living among them. But although at such times there was to be a lot of sharing with the less fortunate, the main focus was on celebrating what they had been given by God, and on being thankful to him.

Along with this celebration and thankfulness comes a warning that they should remain humble before God and not exalt themselves: "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.'" Rather, "remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth". This is perhaps a big temptation in our own society, where most of us only see food on the supermarket shelf at the end of a long production chain full of human and mechanical activity, many steps removed from crops or animals in the fields. And also many people would regard even the growth of crops as "merely" the result of natural physical laws which scientific investigation has allowed us to discover and understand, rather than the beneficence of a loving and powerful God. Certainly a lot of human effort goes into our food production, and human ingenuity has devised the machinery that has replaced back-breaking toil and enabled us to produce enough food to feed billions of people, so we are right to be grateful to all those people, but as Christians we recognise the hand of God in creating and sustaining the sort of world where that is possible. I think it is also an important part of humility in these matters to recognise that God did not create the world just for our benefit; in the creation account in chapter 1 of Genesis we are told "God saw that it was good" on several occasions before humankind are created, and Jesus uses the fact of God's care and provision for birds and grasses to illustrate how much he cares for us. We might like to consider how we can encourage others who do not recognise God as Creator, Sustainer and Lord to have a more humble attitude towards our place as just one species in the world - a discussion for another time, perhaps (and of course we are also called to lead others to a recognition of God as Creator, Sustainer and Lord).

It can be useful to regularly take time to make a list (possibly just a mental list) of things that God has provided for us, individually and as a community. We need to be reminded of these things more often than for them to be pointed out anew, we forget so easily! That list shouldn't be a balance of good things versus bad, so that we only thank God if we think the balance is in our favour; rather, we should thank him for the good things and take the bad to him in prayer. It will probably include material things like our food, our homes, our health, our friendships, the beautiful countryside around us, our work and leisure activities, (even) our clergy! And also we should remember what God has done for us through his son Jesus and the Holy Spirit: forgiveness of sins, an inheritance of eternal life with him, and the Holy Spirit living in us to know him better and to give us the power to love and serve our neighbours.

Because the reading from 2 Corinthians makes it clear that we are called to be generous to others, just as God has been to us. It is not a zero-sum game, where as one person gains another loses the same amount; both the giver and the receiver can be enriched, though maybe in different ways. Nor should it be a profit-and-loss calculation ("if I give this amount now, I'll stand to benefit by that amount later"), though we are assured that we will not be impoverished by our generosity. And we will be glorifying God by such actions.

The effects of the pandemic over the last few months have shaken many people's assumption that human institutions and structures, and the benefits that came through them, were secure. It has also become clear how much good can be done by human-to-human interaction, and what the limits of that are. But we follow a God whose love and provision for us is without limit, and whose power knows no bounds. So let us respond to that with thankfulness, and with generosity towards those around us!

I'd like to finish with the words of Psalm 67:

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.
May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.