Sermon – Stowe harvest - Trinity 17 2020

I want to start with some information that is not strictly relevant to Harvest. I started preparing this on Tuesday, Michaelmas day, the day on which I was ordained 30 years ago. I looked up Michaelmas in Wikipedia and learnt that there is an old British tradition that Michaelmas is the last date on which blackberries could be picked and a special blackberry pie should be cooked to celebrate the end of that delicious harvest. Blackberries lose their attraction because St Michael fought and defeated the rebellious Devil and as he was thrown out of heaven he fell back to earth into a blackberry bush which is not the most comfortable landing. He was not best pleased and cursed and swore and spat on the blackberry and the fruit shrivelled and became unusable.

Back to harvest. I think the countryside is gorgeous all through the year? Judith and I try to go out for a walk each day and vary our route. We have seen, since lockdown began, the seasons unfold in a way that we haven’t fully experienced before. The change from bareness to green to red and gold as Autumn comes in is beautiful. Our garden has given us onions, beans of various types, kale, tomatoes, courgettes and sweet corn as well as crab apples for jelly. So as the year has passed we have relished the freshest possible fruit and vegetables.

Of course most of the food we need can’t be seen as it grows. It’s grown on the land entrusted to farmers and, members of the public are urged to keep off. Or it’s not grown here at all but is imported from countries near and far where conditions are more favourable. I looked at our shopping list for a week and found a large proportion of our food shopping is imported. We have grown accustomed to finding what we want available when we want it at a price that is easy to afford. Our expectations are high.

Harvest celebrations here are happy positive occasions when we, rightly, give thanks to God for the goodness of his creation, for the privilege we have of looking after our small part of it and for the benefit we get from the fruitfulness that is a result of the work we do in tending it. For example, we brought a small box of tomatoes from our garden. We enjoy their taste and freshness and a sense of superiority because we’ve grown it ourselves and it’s good and the travel distance is measured in metres not miles. I admit that there is a risk that our celebrations could become complacent and that we assume that things will always remain as they are. We probably do assume that the good food we have enjoyed in the past will continue in an uninterrupted flood.

On the other hand there is the real risk that we have ignored the reality of the world around us. I don’t think there has been a time in my life when the future – the real impending future – has looked so bleak and threatening. The challenges we face from pollution of land sea and air and global warming that is a measure of the profligate lifestyles adopted as normal by many people, the risks from conflict in many parts of the world destroying good land and good crops that should feed populations, populations that are growing and increase the pressure on food and water, the political conflicts between us and the EU and within society in USA and other countries and our immediate and pressing danger from covid-19. The totality of this should make us tremble and worry if we take it seriously and worry if we don’t.

I hope you listened carefully to our two readings. God’s word to us today in the Gospel is a warning against complacency and greed. The rich man in Jesus’ story had plenty and assumed he could bank his surplus and use it for himself in the future. He couldn’t see the disaster that was about to overcome him. Ask yourself what could he have done to avert his death? I think the story is the final chapter of a story that could have been different if the rich man had looked on his wealth, probably gained at the expense of poor labourers working for him, as something that was a gift to be shared with others. He could have shared his prosperity with others over years. Jesus’ concluding line is: “*This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.*”

I think this teaching must have shocked the disciples so Jesus continued to teach them in private. What he taught was contrary to their culture or understanding of how God worked. They thought that riches were a sign of God’s blessing and if you were poor you were not in favour with God and it was your fault. Even today some preachers teach what is known as the prosperity Gospel and it’s wrong as this teaching of Jesus shows us. Dare I say that we often behave as if it was true and we deserve to be blessed by the lifestyle we enjoy.

I want to unpack what Jesus said a bit more by firstly talking about what he did not say. He did not say that food does not matter. He did not say that adequate clothing to protect us is unimportant. He was clothed and fed by the generosity of the wealthy men and women who knew him and followed him and provided him with what was necessary. In the first sentence of this second part of our Gospel reading Jesus said *“Therefore I tell you do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body what you will wear. Life is more than food and the body more than clothes*.” His instruction is “*do not worry*” don’t become obsessed, don’t be anxious. What he is saying is get the big picture and focus on that. And the big picture is that God created everything, God is in charge and we are sustained and supported by his love and called to show Jesus’ love in our lives.

We, you and me, are the beneficiaries of generations of exploitation of other people and parts of God’s world. What happens now depends on our vision for how our world and how our lives will work out in future near, for ourselves, and far for our grandchildren and great grandchildren.

There’s another story Luke told how Jesus had taught a crowd for some time beside Lake Galilee and when he’d finished told his disciples to launch their boats and go fishing. Simon answered “Master we’ve fished all night and caught nothing. But if you say so (and the inference is that we’re experts and you are not) we’ll do it.” And they did and there was a miraculous catch. Before I unpack this story I want to make 3 points about harvest.

1. God’s creation is better than good; it’s marvellous, fantastic and we should recognise this fact
2. We have been made comfortable and rich by the exploitation of God’s earth
3. If we don’t change, as chicken licken said, the sky will fall in. We are on a slippery slope and, as Ministers have said about Covid, it’s going in the wrong direction.

There’s lots of information about the changes that are necessary for each of us and I don’t think you will thank me for spending the next hour or so listing them. But change will not happen without our involvement and effort and sacrifice. The fishermen who were told to push into the deep didn’t know, probably didn’t expect anything good to happen. Their boats were onshore packed up for the night. They had to work to get them ready to sail or row, they had to get out through their own sweat; they had to set the nets into the water, then lift heavy nets out, heavy with their marvellous catch and row back to shore triumphant and puzzled.

My point is that change will not happen without our effort and work. There is no fairy godmother to fly down to save us but with a willingness to forgo some inessential luxuries – easy travel, holidays in distant destinations, exotic foods flown in and many more we can make a difference as individuals motivated by our faith as we celebrate and give thanks for Harvest home 2020 and be motivated by a desire to be much better at caring for God’s creation and thereby for future generations. We will be stepping away from the disastrous slippery slope onto solid good ground that is God’s gift to us.