

Harvest of Souls

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on Harvest Sunday 18 October 2020

Refs: Isaiah 55.6-end; Luke 10: 1-9

A number of our sermons and clergy letters recently have encouraged us to turn aside for a while from the difficult and depressing time we're going through and focus on the many good things we still enjoy - the many blessings that God continues to shower on us. And what better time could there possibly be to do this than today, with so much to celebrate. For we celebrate St Luke, The Harvest, the gift of God himself in the Eucharist, the fruit of the Spirit, and one more celebration I'll mention later. We should also have been celebrating Sam's baptism. As you heard, sadly he is unwell, but we can still give thanks for the gift of Baptism and add to that the gifts and skills of those in the medical profession who are looking after him. It is appropriate that St Luke was a doctor and is the patron saint of the medical profession, so we appeal to St Luke particularly for Sam.

In his commentary on St Luke William Barclay says that Luke comes across as 'a gentle doctor with a tremendous vision of the infinite sweep of the love of God'. And he says that Luke's Gospel has often been called the loveliest book in the world.

Luke wasn't one of Jesus' disciples so wasn't reporting first-hand experience, but he was a very close companion and friend of St Paul, so would have known many people who had met Jesus and he obviously did a lot of very careful research. So his Gospel and its 'sequel', if you like, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles are careful, beautifully written accounts of the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ. Luke was not Jewish, and so his Gospel contains very few references to the Old Testament, which makes it easier for us to understand. And, being a gentile, Luke was passionate that his words should speak to gentiles, so his Gospel includes encounters between Jesus and gentiles that are not in the other Gospels. Luke also stresses the importance of women, who appear often in his Gospel and in Acts. One of the other focusses of Luke's Gospel is the importance of prayer in Jesus' life. Luke reports Jesus as 'at prayer' before all the important moments of his life.

So, unsurprisingly, Luke tends to be the Gospel that many people find the easiest and the most rewarding. And it's the one we probably remember most passages from – the wonderful Nativity narratives, the Benedictus, the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimittis, and his version of the Lord's Prayer.

In today's passage, Luke tells of Jesus' sending his disciples out to bring in the harvest. Of course, this refers to the harvest of souls, and through his writing, Luke must have brought in a huge harvest of souls for Christ. And it leads us nicely into another of our celebrations, Harvest Thanksgiving.

Most of the cultivated crops, grain, fruit, vegetables, have been gathered in in our own country. It seems it's not too good a harvest this year – we've had sun and rain, but too much of each at the wrong times. There are other harvests, of course – of the seas, rivers, gardens, hedgerows, so we shall not be without food and other necessities of life. We give thanks for this, but we are always mindful that there are millions of people throughout the world who have no food or shelter. Sometimes this is because so much of the land has been ruined, sometimes because of climate change, sometimes it's because a comparatively small proportion of the world's population uses a scandalously high proportion of the world's resources.

We acknowledge the urgent need for greater commitment to taking care of our planet, to sharing its resources far more evenly, and pray for courage to make these commitments. But we give thanks to God, because there is no doubt that if we did those things, he provides enough for everyone's needs.

We also give thanks for the joy we experience every day as we walk through our woods, fields, by our lakes and rivers, and in our gardens, especially at this time of the year in the beautiful autumn light and colour.

And we give thanks for human ingenuity, skill and creativity, that turn natural resources into the things we need, and produce things that give us delight and pleasure, harvest decorations, words of scripture, beautiful music and so on.

Today we had hoped to have another special celebration – the baptism of Sam into the family of Christ. We pray for him, and for all who are looking after him at this time. We trust in God’s healing powers, and we look forward to welcoming Sam and his family another day. But it is good to be reminded of the blessings of Baptism.

In the baptism service we are reminded of some of God’s promises to us. He promises to love us unconditionally. He promises to care for us and to forgive us when we say we’re sorry for things we do wrong. These promises aren’t just for today, they are forever.

And later in our service we are reminded of another of God’s promises – that he will be with us in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

*“Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation:
through your goodness we have this bread to offer,
which earth has given and human hands have made.
It will become the bread of life!”
“through your goodness we have this wine to offer,
fruit of the vine and work of human hands
it will become the cup of salvation.”*

So today we celebrate the fruit of the earth in its many forms. We celebrate the fruit of human ingenuity, skill, creativity, including the gifts of healing. We celebrate the fruit of human love, in Sam, in all our children and we celebrate God’s promises made to us in Baptism, in the Eucharist. All these are tangible tokens of God’s unconditional and abiding love for us, at work through the power of the Holy Spirit. And there is, of course, another work of the Spirit that St Paul so beautifully describes

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Today we celebrate the generosity of Katherine Rawson. In her will of 1705, she left £200 (a huge amount then) for the poor of Wolvercote. This enabled many who would otherwise have gone hungry and cold to receive food and coal. Because it was invested carefully, this money still benefits this parish. It is used through the school to provide additional sessions to help some of the vulnerable children who haven’t received the opportunities that other children receive. Katherine’s will also requires her to be remembered every year close to 16th October, the anniversary of her baptism. This traditionally included a sermon for which the preacher can be paid 50p (I think)! I’m not sure any one has claimed that for many years!! So we give thanks for the generosity of Katherine Rawson.

Endurance is also mentioned in the Bible as one of the gifts of the Spirit. In these tough days, and when we are disappointed to hear about Sam’s illness, we realise the importance of ‘endurance’, along with ‘patience and self-control’. They enable us to abide in joy and peace and faith, and give us the strength to show kindness, generosity, and gentleness to others, SO important at this time when there is so much sadness and chaos around us.

I hope that we shall also feel strengthened, uplifted and nourished by this opportunity to give thanks and celebrate the joys, the blessings, the abundant fruits of God’s abiding love.

Amen