

Harvest Festival 2015 Puy de Serre

Mt. 6 25-33; 1 Tim 6 6-10

When I was a boy and a member of the Young Farmers I loved Harvest Festival. The church beautifully decorated with produce, including two sheaves of corn in front of the altar, and my most abiding memory, during the processional hymn an elderly local farmer – though perhaps he was younger than I am now – who would present his offering of a fresh baked loaf he had made using flour ground from his own wheat. It still sums up for me much of what I believe harvest is about – the recognition that God provides for our needs and our natural response of gratitude and sharing what He gives to us with others.

But there is more. Jesus' parable of the sower is meant to apply to each one of us. By God's grace we encounter the gospel message – and let us today thank God for those people and events in our lives he used to reveal it to us. God intends the seed of his love, sown in our hearts and lives, to grow and be fruitful. We find the same message in the hymn, 'Come ye thankful people come'. Our lives are meant to be spent in the growing in the knowledge and love of God through Jesus our Lord and Saviour and sharing his love in the service of others. All we need to do is believe and trust, keeping our lives focussed on God, allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal Him to us and through us, day by day. It sounds so easy, doesn't it? But we know it's not.

Just as the many gardeners here today know how much work they have to do to deal with weeds, pests, poor soil and bad weather – to name just a few of the problems they face – so there are many things which would distract us from God's purpose and inhibit our spiritual growth. Jesus spells them out in his parable. They can be summed up in fear and lack of faith.

So how do we grow throughout our lives for bring God the fruit he intends from them?

Today's gospel contains one of the verses which has helped me most on my Christian journey.

'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.'

It has come back to me over the years, as though God wished to remind me of it, whenever I was faced with major decisions. Getting married, my first job, offering myself for ordination, repeatedly during my years of ministry and now again as we prepare to go to work in the church in Thailand later this year. Its message has always been to remind me that God is totally to be trusted. The one who provides for the birds and creates the lilies of the field in their beauty will be faithful to provide for me, however little and fearful my faith may be. It invites me to shift my focus and look to God in trust and expectation, to review my priorities, value God's gifts and dedicate myself and them once more to his service.

But how do we seek God's kingdom first?

Reading John chapter 15 – the passage in which Jesus claims to be the true vine – helped me begin to see how this might be.

Those who remain in Jesus will find he remains in them and, though we may need a little pruning, he promises that if we remain in him we will be fruitful, not because of our own, often misguided and feeble efforts, but because he is God's Son, our Saviour and our Lord.

It is always good to be reminded, but especially on this harvest festival day, that God faithfully and lovingly, forgivingly whenever it is needed, provides us in Jesus with all we need to grow and be fruitful. All we need to do is remain in Christ, believing and trusting in him and seeking first his kingdom.

What does this mean? I believe it means recognising Jesus as our king and choosing to allow him to reign in our hearts. Praying the Lord's prayer, as so often, tells us how, by speaking to us of putting his will for our lives first, of admitting our own need for forgiveness and seeking his help in forgiving others and resisting temptation.

Mark chapter 9 reminds us that we need to be childlike – certainly not childish – vulnerable, dependent, often helpless, trusting in the love of God our father to provide for all our needs.

Mark chapter 8 reminds us that God's love is extended to all. Jesus came to save the world, not condemn it, but to die that people may have life in all its fullness. So we are to expect to see His face, meet with Him, in the weak and vulnerable, the children and the outcast.

There is a chorus you may well have sung. It goes:- 'Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus, to reach out and touch him and say that we love him. Open our eyes Lord, we want to see Jesus.'

We can see the words as a prayer. Jesus has already answered it. He is to be found in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the prisoner, the unwanted and the unloved. It is when we respond to them with the love and compassion of Jesus, given to us by His Holy Spirit, that we see His face and his kingdom comes.

Finally the theme of harvest thanksgiving, like so much in Christian calendar, is never meant to be limited to one day in the year. Just as the history of the world, past, present and future, is transformed by the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, so as we travel on our life's journey we recognise that God is with us, loving and forgiving, providing for our needs, helping us to grow and bring forth fruit, until our lives are ripe and we are ready for harvesting, gathered in to use Henry Alford's words, 'Free from sorrow, free from sin, there forever purified in God's garner to abide.'

So let us continue to believe and trust in the love of our Saviour Jesus, seeking first his kingdom, rejoicing in being his servants and looking to see his face in all those in need to whom we reach in love in his name. Amen