

HARVEST SERMON 2015

There are some awful things happening all around us, scenes on our television screens, the internet and in the newspapers that are haunting. They portray what, for some people must feel like hell on earth and yet today we are here to give thanks and praise to God for his goodness.

And I can do that genuinely because God has been good, he has provided physically and spiritually for us, and because over the last few days I have witnessed people giving of their time and their resources so generously; many, many of them people of no faith, who are acting out of love for those in desperate need and I thank God for all of them.

We who profess to believe in God and to follow his ways, must also act. Jesus said: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to see me.' (Matt 25: 35-36).

Our God is a loving God, if we feel pain when we see these images, what pain must he be in to see his children suffering so?

Our Gospel reading was from an earlier chapter in Matthew and must seem a real challenge for many people, but it needs also to be put in context. It is part of a large number of teachings under the title of 'The Sermon on the Mount' from Chapter 5 to 7. He is instructing his new disciples how to live their lives so that they can be an example to others. This teaching is not a list of entry requirements to enter the kingdom of God. Those he is speaking to have already responded to his call. Nor is it an idealistic representation of that kingdom, but it is a description of what life will look like for the followers of Jesus as they try to live their lives faithfully to God's values, it is a response to the gospel of grace that Jesus preaches.

Immediately preceding our reading is the passage about not storing up worldly treasures; 'for where your treasure is there, your heart will be also'. So this continues that theme, not to

worry about all that can obsess us instead having total dependence on God.

Depending on God to provide our everyday needs, being grateful to him for that provision, not judging how well we have done in our lives by the things that we own. Our ultimate security is not in wealth but in God, and he meets the needs of his followers largely through the generosity of others among his people who have more. Jesus assumes his followers give to the needy verse 3 says 'when you give to those in need' and we have heard his teaching in chapter 25 of having compassion and generosity for others. We, who have been given so much in Christ, by a loving and generous God who gave his only Son that we might live, can only respond by giving to those who have less.

What does total dependence on God look like to each one of us? We are all walking our own journey of faith and so will be at different stages. But it is important not to get stuck or diverted on the way. Rather our aim should be progress, our faltering steps can become firmer,

our choices clearer, shedding our independence and our obsession with worldly matters so that we can start to be clothed with righteousness.

Often when things are at their most desperate there is no one else but God, nowhere else to turn to. Our challenge is to make that true of our lives when we are not desperate but comfortable, remember the story of the rich young man (Matt 19: 16-22); are we depending on anything more than Jesus to give us satisfaction in life? We may not all be called to give away all of our wealth, but is it a conscious or unconscious god in our lives? Later in Matthew (22:37-40) we are told by Jesus: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself."