

The Greater Harvest

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron
at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist on 25 September 2022.
The readings were: Amos 6:1, 4-7; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31



Today we give thanks for the harvest and reflect on the true riches, both material and spiritual, with which God has blessed us.

Over the past few Sundays we've been hearing a lot about money and wealth, and how we need to discern carefully where our true wealth lies. Last week we had the strange parable of the dishonest steward, a man who cheated his boss by cutting customers' bills in order to ingratiate himself with them so that when he got the sack he would have friends to help him. This was probably not the best strategy, as he was clearly laying down wealth for himself on earth rather than looking to God to provide for his needs. This week we're offered a stark distinction between the arrogance of the uncaring rich and the faith of the vulnerable poor, in the story of the rich man who feasted sumptuously while the poor man sat at his gate covered in sores. Alarmingly there's no forgiveness in this parable, only a terrible warning of the fate that awaits those who think that having great wealth places them on a higher plane than those who have none. In the ultimate judgement, what happens is the reverse: the rich man goes down to Hades while the poor man is lifted up to heaven by angels.

The prophet Amos sounded an earlier warning against preferring a life of luxury to caring about the poor and dispossessed. It's not the enjoyment of the good things of life, wine in bowls and "the finest oils" that causes the offence, for after all doesn't the Bible celebrate such things as gifts from God (Psalm 23, for example, that talks of the table that God has prepared for us, or the story of the wedding at Cana, with its plentiful supply of wine); no, the offence lies in ignoring or patronising the deprived while shamelessly enjoying our own comfort. Amos is a bit of a dour prophet, raging against the state of the world and pointing his finger at the coming judgement, a killjoy who needs to lighten up a bit, we might feel, for he fails to balance his picture of divine wrath with the opposite, the great love of God for miserable offenders whose lives have gone awry. God longs for people to *change their ways* so that they can truly enjoy the good things that he has prepared for those who love him.

One of the important themes of harvest festival is the sharing of wealth, the just distribution or re-distribution of the produce of the earth by those fortunate enough to have received more than others. Remembering that all good gifts come from God, Christians not only give thanks but also remember those in need, for whatever reason. This year, Christian Aid is reminding us of the issue of climate change and in particular the drought that has brought about the worst hunger crisis for forty years in the Horn of Africa, where it's commonplace for millions go hungry.





In 2011 there was a major famine in the region and many died, for the world was unprepared to deliver aid on a massive scale. In 2017, it happened again, but this time a highly organised aid effort moved quickly and millions of lives were saved. Christians joined together in hope, ignored the prophets of doom who said effective action was impossible and declared, “It is possible” and made it happen. And once again, Ethiopia faces starvation following crop failure because of drought. This year’s Christian Aid appeal contains the statements: “We must not be seduced by the word impossible,” and “We *can* make a difference. We *can* save lives.”¹

Here at home we’re concerned about the cost of living, how people will be able to heat their homes and also provide food for their families this coming winter. Food banks are hardly ideal in a relatively affluent society but they are a sign of a problem that generous people find intolerable. Over the two years of the pandemic, nearly 8,000 people were given three-day emergency food supplies in South West Fife.² Our local foodbank in Rosyth is part of a nation-wide network founded in 2004 by the Trussell Trust, a movement that arose from a legacy left by Betty Trussell to her daughter, which she and her husband used to send aid to homeless children in Bulgaria. This attracted some publicity, and soon afterwards the couple received a call from a local woman who was faced with the prospect of sending her children to bed hungry. The husband did some research on poverty in the UK and found that many people faced going hungry as a result of some sudden personal crisis, so he started the Salisbury Foodbank in his garden shed and garage with the aim of providing three days’ emergency food to tide people over.

The idea spread rapidly through church communities, with inspiration drawn from the verse in Matthew 25: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35–36).

This verse is at the heart of the Christian gospel that teaches love of God and love of neighbour as the principal commandments. Today’s reading from 1 Timothy lists the true values as “righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.” These are gifts that come by *grace* to those who know their need for God and put God at the centre of their lives, who live in the security of faith through good times and bad, who show care and compassion for one another. Because we can’t win these spiritual gifts by our own efforts, we say that they come to us *by the grace of God*. It is this grace alone that helps us find the inner resources of strength and courage to see us through the storms of life and to extend to our neighbours the love of God that we have known.

Paul talks about “fighting the good fight of faith,” reminding us that the Christian life is far from easy and we need to support one another as much as we can along the way. Battle imagery is completely appropriate, as we need to fight our own strong tendencies to pursue our interests at the expense of others. The desire for possessions is “particularly corrosive.”³ Self-denial and self-control are spiritual gifts that bring us a *greater* harvest of love, joy and peace than any short-term advantage we might gain through trying to satisfy what Paul describes as the “many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” (6:9).





We do, of course, have *basic* needs for food and clothing, and Paul acknowledges that, but the danger lies in our tendency to pursue the unnecessary. One commentator remarks that there is “a transition from *basic* food and clothing to *nice* food and clothing, and from there to stylish clothing and rich food [that] takes place gradually.”⁴ And there, of course, lie the pitfalls: the competitiveness, the envy, the getting into debt, the descent into dishonesty. “The love of money,” writes Paul, “is the root of all kinds of evil” (v.10).

In contrast to the worldly discontent that leads us astray so very easily, Paul writes of another way, a way that recognizes the uniqueness and transcendence of God. God is “the only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who “has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light” (v.15). This God provides for us richly “with everything for our enjoyment” – and we acknowledge this especially in the harvest season. The Christian life is far from dull but on the contrary full of all the interest and stimulation, adventure, refreshment and comfort we need. In Christ, we are invited to “take hold of the life that really *is* life” (v.19).

Living in the light of the Resurrection, wherever we go, whatever the changing circumstances of our lives, we know we will encounter the living presence and the love of Christ. So let us set your hope on him and “take hold of the life that really is life.” Amen.

¹ <https://www.christianaid.org.uk>

² <https://dunfermline.foodbank.org.uk/>

³ A.K.M. Adam, Commentary on 1 Timothy 6:6–19, Text This Week.

⁴ Ibid.

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