**4th October 2015**

**Harvest Thanksgiving**

**Matthew 13.1-8; 2 Corinthians 9.6-15**

Walking around the fields in Herefordshire last weekend, where we were staying with my in laws on our last weekend of my sabbatical, we had evidence all around us that it was harvest time. Some fields had just been freshly harvested and there was still the stubble left in the ground of the crop that had been harvested. Some fields had been freshly ploughed awaiting reseeding, some had a strong smell of manure.

I heard a story about Farmer Evans was driving his John Deere tractor along the road with a trailer load of fertilizer. Tim a little boy of eight was playing in his yard when he saw the farmer and asked, 'What've you got in your trailer?'

'Manure,' Farmer Evans replied.

'What are you going to do with it?' asked Tim.

'Put it on my strawberries,' answered the farmer.

Tim replied, 'You ought to come and eat with us, we put ice-cream on our strawberries.'

Some fields we walked in had livestock, including one where on leaving the field we noticed a sign saying ‘beware the bull’. Ignorance is bliss. It reminds me of the saying: *The farmer allows walkers to cross his field for free,... But the bull charges!*

We had to negotiate other hazards as well: On more than one occasion we came face to face with huge agricultural machinery that was taking no prisoners. Harvest time is a busy time and at this time of year we give thanks for those who produce our food, the most essential need of all, and we give thanks for the Creator of all we have and enjoy and remind ourselves that we are stewards of this creation and pray we may be wise stewards.

Harvest time has gone on through the centuries and it is no surprise to know that harvest time imagery and examples are frequent in the bible and in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. So I thought as I come back from a three month sabbatical I would draw on the imagery of harvest.

Three months off is a real gift and I know many people could do with one in their own line of work. In the United Reformed Church you get one every ten years of ministry and it’s designed to be a release from the 24/7 aspect of ministry and a chance to catch your breath. It has given me plenty time to reflect on my calling as a church minister and how effective I am.

The parable of the sower has a sower sowing seed. In some respects that is the job of an evangelist and a pastor. The evangelist to share the gospel, the pastor to make sure it takes root and bears fruit. It is always a cause of concern as to whether you are sowing well: preaching and teaching a true word, helping people find faith and grow in their faith.

I’ve come back with renewed desire to that. Walking around the Holy Land has been truly inspirational. It is so helpful to reimagine the stories of scripture, to walk where Jesus has walked. They say the Holy Land is the fifth gospel, and once you have been there it adds a whole new dimension to your reading and understanding of scripture: it brings it into glorious technicolour. It is one of the reasons why I was happy to lead a pilgrimage back there next November and I encourage you to consider coming on it.

It is a real shot in the arm for your faith. A recent survey undertaken in godless Britain suggested that 40% of people believe the story of Jesus is a myth and has no basis in history. After you have been to the Holy Land that is hard to accept. You are reminded time and again of the historical earthiness of the life of Jesus, the context and the culture of his ministry. It helped me to re-read the gospels with Jewish eyes and appreciating again the culture and context with which the New Testament was written.

Some of that re-reading I will offer to you in a few bible studies, which starts later this month, looking at Romans,. This seed of faith, the word of God, is always active and full of life. You need to keep grasping with it and re- reading it, the Spirit always has more light to shine forth. It is so apt that on this harvest we dedicate these new bibles. The bible is our authority for faith and a growing faith will grapple and engage in dialogue with scripture. Hear and understand as the parable of the sower urges.

I realise that that is a big part of my job. Eugene Peterson, who wrote the message version of the Bible, is a wise Presbyterian minister from the USA who has written many classic books on ministry. He believes a pastor should be mainly about spiritual direction. The art of paying attention to God and calling attention to God in a person, or circumstance or a situation. He writes: ‘*We are there to say ‘God’ personally, to say his name, clearly, distinctly, unapologetically, in proclamation and prayer. We are there to say it without hewing and hawing, without throat clearing and without shuffling, without propagandizing, proselytising or manipulating. We have no other task. We are not needed to add to what is there. We are required only to say the name: Father Son and Holy Spirit. [[1]](#endnote-1) Pastors remind people that God is both on our side and at our side even when it doesn’t seem like it’.*

So I’ve come back to bother you with God: because life really is all about having to bother with God. Some doubt, some defy, some people’s faith is muffled by the dull ache of routines until something happens which brings awareness of some spiritual hunger and need. Hopefully pastors can nudge that awareness past subjectivities towards God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. So the seed of faith can grow. Hearing and understanding.

Peterson describes church congregations as the top soil in which the seed of faith can take root and grow. Topsoil is the dirt under your feet which is a treasure – millions of organisms constantly interacting, a constant cycle of life and death, and the source of most of the world’s food.

There are few people who respect, nourish and protect the topsoil. There are many who would strip mine it, who treat it carelessly and expose it to wind and water erosion. Others would just concrete it over and put new houses or a shopping centre on top. Topsoil is disappearing at an alarming rate around the world.

Peterson draws the comparison between the local church congregation and topsoil. This is the material substance in which all the Spirit’s work takes place – these people, assembled in worship, dispersed in blessing, they are so ordinary and messy, so dirty – by which he means not that one can question their cleanliness but that no-one is perfect.

Peterson warns that we can become preoccupied with building theological roads, mission projects and parking lots so that we treat this precious congregational topsoil as something dead and inert, to be rearranged to suit our vision, and then to bulldoze whatever isn’t immediately useful, in order to build something to keep up with the neighbours.

Yet this is the field of pastoral work, just as it is teeming with energy, nutrients, mixing life and death. You cannot manufacture it, but you can protect it and nourish it. You can refrain from polluting it or violating it and like the farmer be in awe of the vast mysteries contained in its unassuming ordinariness.

Each congregation is different, even more than each soul is different, for the church is a compound of souls. What works in one place cannot be imposed in another. You are unique

Whilst I’ve been away I’m sure the top soil has been active and full of energy. Thank you for all those who have been caring for our turf. I hope I can come back and be part of that gentle cultivation. We need each other.

Justin Bieber, the pop star, was talking about his Christian faith the other day and said Christians leave such a bad taste in your mouth. *‘I’m not going to church even though my friends there are cool. It doesn’t make you a Christian just by going to church. If you go to Taco bell (a fast food chain) that doesn’t make you a taco!’* Well quite Justin! But the reverse is not likely to be true. It is difficult to be a Christian if you don’t belong to a church. He even concedes that by admitting that ‘*church is fellowship, its relationship to have this connection that you feel there’s no insecurities.’* Go to church Justin – otherwise you will be missing out on some vital nutrients.

Of course our consumer and individualistic society militate against us meeting together. We have substitute communities and ways to belong these days. I went to a seminar the other day on social media and the presenter made the claim that 40% of 18-35 years olds check their Facebook page first thing in the morning before they talk to another human being. Virtual community is no substitute for the real thing though. Let us not give up meeting together and so encourage each other in our faith, so the scripture tell us. Our fellowship group are a great opportunity to do that. Prayer triplets are trying to get off the ground oo – meeting together just two or three. At least find some way to belong to the church in order to sustain and encourage you and for you to help others in their journey of faith. Otherwise the seed of faith will wither and die and not bear fruit.

What does that fruit look like: there is scriptural verse that says ‘you reap what you sow’ Galatians 6.7. That can be both a threat and also a promise. Those who sow generously reap the harvest of their generosity. Those who sow sparingly or begrudgingly likewise reap sparingly. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9. Those who forgive and show mercy are more likely to have forgiveness and mercy shown to them. They are likely to live lives free from the vice of anger and all its resultant complications such as ill health and dis-ease.

Ten years ago, at my last sabbatical, we went to Atlanta in Georgia, in the USA. Whilst we were there in March 2005 there was a remarkable story about a woman who had been held hostage by a murderer on the run. That story has just been made into a film called ‘Captive’ which is currently on release in this country[[2]](#endnote-2).

Brian Nichols was on the run after having killed four people. He took Ashley Smith hostage hostage in her own home for seven hours. During that time he threatened to kill. Like her captor Ashley had experienced self-destructive darkness and distress – in her case watching her husband, who had a history of being violent towards her, being murdered and then turning to drugs in her despair resulting in losing her daughter to care. Through the long dark hours of her captivity she read Nichols excerpts from the Bible and the Christian book ‘The Purpose Driven Life’ by Rick Warren. One of the quotes from that book says *‘the greatest tragedy is not death but life without purpose’.* The book and reading the bible provided hope for two broken people. ‘*If you want to know why you were placed on the planet you must begin with God’* Ashley read from the book.

‘I haven’t been given anything’, Nichols replied. Ashley said ‘you have a son’. She said ‘What you’ve done its really terrible and I know first-hand because someone killed my husband... but to God it’s no different than what I’ve done by lying to my family or doing drugs or stealing from a department store. It’s no different... not to God. And if he can forgive me, he can forgive you’.

She encouraged Nichols to believe that it is possible for his life to be turned around. She said that one thing helps me sometimes is this verse: ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’.

This is a spoiler alert so cover your ears if you don’t want to know how it ends: Nichols gives himself up to the police in the end. Ashley Smith looking back on the night’s events says this: ‘*God has something for me to do, and I was doing it. I was telling Brian what he needed to hear, trying to help him quit hurting people and turn himself in. If God only used perfect people nothing would get done because none of us is perfect*. *Wherever you are there’s hope*.’

I commend the film to you: it’s called the Captive – but as it’s explicitly about the Christian faith – don’t expect it to be in too many cinemas for too long in squeamish Britain – so if you fancy going to see it – do it quickly.

Scripture says that ‘peacemakers sow in peace and reap a harvest of righteousness’ James 3.18. There is not much peace in the Middle East at the moment. The situation in Syria dominates the news. It was one moment when I was tempted to come back from sabbatical early. Making a distinction with economic migrants, the bible is quite clear – you don’t turn away refugees who are running for their lives. You don’t consider how this will upset our comfort and our prosperity. You thank God you have comfort and prosperity to share. All we have is a gift from God – that is the message of Harvest: a gift that should be shared when the need arises.

The Middle East is and arguably always has been turbulent. Israel itself is secure, mainly through the strong Israeli Defence Force and police but also though their control of the West Bank and the Palestinians. We saw both sides whilst we were out there and the situation seems intractable. I will say more this afternoon. I met with many Palestinian Christian leaders and was humbled by their faith and courage in working as peacemakers for justice and a nonviolent resolution to the difficulties out there.

The Tent of Nations outside the West Bank city of Hebron is a farm owned by a Palestinian Christian called Daoud Nasser. The farm has been in his family ownership for a hundred years but they are now being squeezed by aggressive Jewish settlements trying to intimate them into giving up their land so that there can be a Jewish stranglehold in the area. Daoud said they refuse to be victims. They refuse to hate. They refuse to be enemies. They believe in God’s justice and that they will overcome evil with good, darkness with light. They invest their frustrations positively and channel their negative feelings in a constructive way by holding youth camps and peace seminars trying to encourage different faiths and races to meet and share together in common humanity. It is the way he lives his faith in Christ. It is not without its costs.

Down the road from the Tent of Nations we dropped in on an organisation called Roots which tries to bring Israeli settlers together with Palestinians to hear each other’s stories. We sat in on an encounter between a Jewish rabbi who believed that God had given the land to the Jews, and a Palestinian mother whose son had been shot dead by Israeli soldiers. The rabbi shared how he thought all Palestinians were terrorist who carried guns and shot people. Then he met a Palestinian who shared that he thought that all Jews carried guns and shot people. He realised that they were both trapped in mutual fear.

The Palestinian woman shared herself so openly and emotionally that it was like she was bleeding in front us with an open wound. Yet there wasn’t just communication between the Jewish rabbi and the Palestinian there was also an attempt at communion – a deep sharing of self to another self. We talk about the need of communication in any relationship – but sometimes when you communicate you make matters worse. The type of communication that transforms is the communication that leads to communion – a deep sharing of yourself with another. Roots is trying to break down the barriers in the deeply segregated country between Israeli and Palestinian and give a communion between those two peoples. Blessed are the peacemakers.

God is doing amazing stuff... which often is the case when people are desperate and have no other hope to cling to but God himself. We visited the small Palestinian town of Aboud and a Greek orthodox church. Father Emmanuel has a deep faith and belief in the healing power of God. Miracles are taking place there. For example, a Muslim woman came into her church distraught that her son had been involved in an accident and was fighting for his life. The doctors had said there was no hope and were about to remove his life support system. With the priest she wept in front of an icon of the Virgin Mary, pleading with God for help. As she left the church her mobile phone rang. It was a message to say that her son had come back to life. Within a week he was making a full recovery. News of this spread and now many Muslims come to the church for prayer with father Emmanuel.

There are many more stories – for many more sermons.

The thing about harvest is that is goes on. Every year you harvest and then you start again. In biblical imagery there is a Harvest at the end of time when the world will be put right, when justice will be done and a new heaven and a new earth will be created by God, the divine creator. We have an end in sight which we work towards. The End defines all we do in the present.

What is the point to what we do? Where is the hope? Are our efforts worthwhile? The Bible assures us that is it. At the end of a discussion on resurrection Paul says ‘*therefore my brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*’ 1 Cor 15. 58

Keep sowing the seed, keep tending the top soil, bear the fruit of faith: peace-making, reconciliation, redemption, healing, hope.

Keep bringing in the harvest whilst looking for the harvest at the end of all time: the harvest of all righteousness.

1. E Peterson, Under the Unpredictable Plant, p86, Eerdmans, 1992 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.captivethemovie.com/>

   Questions:

   Read Matthew 13.1-8 and then the explanation in verses 18-23.

   Discuss how you came to faith: who sowed the seed?

   How did you hear and understand?

   Did you have any times when you were on stony ground,

   Or felt tempted or the evil one was snatching you away, or the cares of this world pulling you away.

   How can we help people find roots and firm foundations for their faith.

   What are the fruit of faith? Discuss some of the examples in the sermon. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)