

On Monday I was walking along the Thames at Goring and Streatley with a friend who is visiting from Australia. We spent the day walking or sitting by the river; reading or just enjoying the sun. Each of the churches we walked past had signs up advertising the coming of Harvest Festival this weekend.

Just so you know, Harvest Festival is not such a big deal in Australia and is almost non-existent in Urban areas these days. Also, my friend after a very bad experience with the church and its structures, as well as the prevalence of bigotry within it; has little time for the church or organised religion.

So in this context, my friend turned to me and asked 'What is all this about Harvest Festival'. I said that is was really what it said on the tin – a time for giving thanks to God for this years Harvest. Their response was quick and to the point – so God is responsible for the good harvest but has no responsibility for the devastation of crops in the world by people and natural disasters. My equally quick response was to say – yes these things do exist – often as a result of humanities misuse of creation – but that the point of Harvest Festival is not that bad things don't happen – or that farming and the production of food is often difficult, thankless and heart-breaking – but rather Harvest gives us a space to be thankful for what we have – and for the joy of the seasons -and that God does provide for us.

My friend asks a good question however, and one that often is in our minds even if we don't have the courage to ask it! Even in the last few days news of a Tsunami which has hit Indonesia where already over 500 are reported dead – how do we celebrate Harvest in the face of such a thing?

Being thankful can be hard work! Seeing what is positive and joyous and a gift equally can be difficult. Ironically – often the more we have, the harder it is to be thankful to God for the provision of our daily needs.

It is a challenge at times to look beyond the pain of those who do not have enough; or the damage caused by drought, tsunami, floods, cyclones as well as fires – let alone the damage made by our own existence each day – to see that there is much to give thanks for.

Yet what I have noticed is this is so often influenced by what we see, and how we see it.

All our produce and harvest gifts will go to Laurence's Larder up at Christ Church. Many of us volunteer there, and many of you have been to visit, or assist in lots of different ways. For us however who walk in having had breakfast and a hot shower – often what we are offering seems meagre. Yet I am so often humbled by the overwhelming thanks and gratitude I encounter. What looks in my comfort to be a small intervention, is an unimaginable gift to someone else.

To a person who has slept outside all night, worried that their boots or bag might be taken by a fox. Who is damp from the night air, and hasn't eaten since yesterday lunch time – a small homemade bowl of soup and a piece of day old bread is a real feast; and it is received as such.

A bar of chocolate for us is a treat. To a person who is lying awake, cold by the union canal at 3am in the morning, it is the energy to stay warm and hopeful for the dawn to arrive.

To someone living in a converted garage with 6 other men, and one toilet – access to a hot shower and a clean towel – and the offer of a haircut or a shave – seems almost like a spa treatment.

In 2018 it seems to me that it is impossible that this situation exists – but it does and it can be hard to be thankful for all that is good, when we hear such stories. But what surprises me every time that I go to Laurence's Larder is that it is not a place of self-pity; or where people focus on the pain or hardness – don't get me wrong – many sad and painful stories are told – and so much continues to be hard, and at times feels like there is no way forward. But the prevalent attitude in the community of people who access the larder is one of gratitude, thankfulness and hope.

How this possible? What allows such hope?

In contrast to the stories at the Larder – I am often shocked when I shop in Salusbury road, or wander down the street at the lack of gratitude for all we have, and sometimes even a lack of hope.

I realise this is a generalisation, but so often I am struck by the contrast when I walk out of the Larder, to what I encounter when I come down the hill – in terms of gratitude.

Our readings from Joel and Matthew this morning begin the same way – Do not fear, Do not worry! They are hard words to hear, and often difficult to obey! I think they mirror a knowledge which Jesus saw in the first century and which is equally difficult today – possessions are a real problem and a threat to our reliance on, and trust of God. The more we have, the less we rely on God.

Do not worry about what you will eat in 6:25 does not mean that food is unimportant; followers of Jesus should pray for "daily bread" (6:11), but then trust God to provide it. For those for whom the scarcity of food is a daily concern, it is not easy to be unconcerned. Jesus makes it sound as if securing clothing is part of the natural process, like the "lilies of the field" which "neither toil nor spin." Jesus compares these beautiful and well-cared for lilies to Solomon's wealth, a well-known tradition about the wealthiest royalty in Jewish history. But the reality of life in the first century for many people was a challenge to acquire the necessities of life-like food and clothing-through laborious living. Yet, life is more than food and clothing. That is, life is more than food for those who do not need to worry about their next

meal or whether they will be cold tonight. Clearly, Jesus is not unaware of the challenges of living in first century villages: "Today's trouble is enough for today" (6:34).<sup>1</sup>

There are lots of things going on in this passage – but Jesus is challenging the faith of the disciples, not their wealth or poverty. Later in Matthew he does the same again challenging not only their faith, but their trust (16:8) Here, in chapter 6, Jesus focuses their attention on everyday affairs, the mundane. Yet, his followers are encouraged not to "worry" (in this instance, it means "to be overly concerned; to care too much; to be anxious"). Where is their faith in regard to the every day cares of life? If Jesus' followers cannot trust God in these moments, how can they expect to trust God's grander activities in the world?

In the passage we hear today Jesus explains what it means not to be motivated by wealth. He has yet to explain what it might mean to serve God. At the end of the passage the discussion shifts. For those who seek after God's rule in the world (6:33), concern for wealth and possessions (6:19-24) conflicts with God's provisions for the necessities of life (6:25-34). To place effort in acquiring goods for one's self may distract from seeking righteousness and justice around us.

Make no mistake it is a hard lesson which Jesus is teaching the disciples, and an even harder one to hear on a day when we come to give thanks for all that God provides for us.

At the heart of Jesus message however is the promise that God will take care of us – and as such God expects us to take care of God's justice in the world. Put energy into things that will bring meaning to life, that is the justice of God's Kingdom – rather than being so focused on the provision of our own daily needs.

This is the heart of the message of Harvest Festival – Strive for the Kingdom of God and its righteousness, and our daily needs will be met, is the promise of Today's Gospel. It is this that we can be thankful for.

And if at times the harshness of the world, and the immensity of the need before us seems to much – maybe we can remember the words of Mother Theresa who said "If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one."

Many of you have heard me singing the Harvest Samba over the past week – it my favourite Harvest Song which sadly only is sung in Primary Schools – but the chorus goes

*It's another Harvest Festival*

*When we bring our fruit and vegetables,*

*Cause we want to share the best of all*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=841](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=841)

*the good things that we've been given.*

*It's another opportunity,*

*To be grateful for the food we eat,*

*With a samba celebration to say thank*

*you to God our creator<sup>2</sup>!*

Whether we feed one or one hundred, whether we worry a little or a lot about our daily needs – lets remember today to be grateful and to say thank you to God!

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wz35-O8I9d0v>