

26th Sunday Ordinary Time 2017

Fr Peter Groves

Harvest

Reading

Philippians 2:1-11

The image of harvest is prominent in the gospels, with their seed and shrubs and fields and fig trees and vineyards. Of course, in the teaching of Jesus, the produce of God's harvest is not food but people. And not just any old people. When the Lord orders his banquet and finds his guests reluctant to come, he instructs his servants to compel the outcasts, the poor, the halt, the lame, the downtrodden, to come and take their places at the feast. When reflecting on our own good fortune, on the extraordinary privilege of not worrying about being fed, it is good that we can use a traditional notion like harvest to do a little in the service of others. But it's also good to be reminded that, if we attend to the mission and ministry of Jesus, we

will conclude that those others are the fruits of God's kingdom rather more obviously than we ourselves.

In this remarkable claim, the gospels are joined by the whole of the scriptural witness, and particularly in the passage we heard this morning from Philippians. Those few verses are among the most significant in all Christian theology. Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

These words are truly extraordinary. Here we have Paul, formerly Saul, a Pharisee by his own admission, a pious and zealous child of the tribe of Benjamin, writing of a fellow Jew, a teacher and preacher whom he never met, one who was executed as a criminal only thirty years before. And Paul says, of the teacher he never met, that

he was in the form of God. You don't need to know much about history, or about the Jewish faith, to realize how remarkable that statement is.

There is a translation issue in this passage which takes us deeper into the condescension which characterizes the God of Jesus Christ. The poor and outcast are the fruit of God's kingdom because there is no limit to that condescension, no state so seemingly low, by worldly standards, that it is not embraced by the divine. The version we heard follows the usual reading: Jesus did not think equality with God was something to be grasped, to be snatched at, to be rudely and greedily seized as an ill-mannered child would grab at a sweet or a present. This is partly the sense, but even better would be "Did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited". This sense, exploited, taken advantage of, is an idiomatic usage paralleled in other late Greek texts. And it fits both the context, and Paul's wider teaching about Christ, absolutely perfectly. Jesus did not regard

equality with God as something to be taken advantage of.

From this sense, we can understand the potent little phrase “emptied himself”. Those words underlie a significant tradition of talk about Christ, talk which we call kenotic Christology, kenotic because of the Greek word “kenosis” which means “emptying”. The idea is that, in becoming human, the Son empties himself of his divinity, only to take it up again after his passion, death and resurrection.

Now kenotic Christology has famous advocates, among them Martin Luther, about to be much on our minds we mark five hundred years of the Protestant Reformation. More recently Lutheran and also Anglican theologians have dwelt much on this idea of kenosis, but it is – if taken too far – problematic. When Christ emptied himself, he did not empty himself of his divinity. God cannot cease to be God, that much is logically impossible, as

nonsensical as the idea that God can create a four sided triangle. The incarnate Son retains his divine nature throughout, and all I mean by that is that it is always true to say, this man Jesus is God. If we take this notion of emptying where it shouldn't go, we will end up saying that it wasn't actually God that became human, but some lesser thing, something which wasn't quite God, but accommodate himself so as to become human, leaving his divinity safely behind in heaven.

That is a dangerous way of talking, but other Christian thinkers have observed that the kenosis, the emptying, that Paul talks of is better considered as a pattern of the whole life of God himself. The point is that the life of God, the life of the Trinity, is the eternal emptying of each of the three persons of the Trinity into the others. There is nothing about the Father which is not always being poured out in love to the Son and the Spirit, and the same is true of those two. What God is, is a life of self-giving love, a life of self-emptying

quite regardless of humanity, creation or incarnation. This, Christianity teaches, is what divinity is. But as the great theologian Karl Barth put it, God has chosen to be God for us. God in the freedom of his love has chosen to unite himself with humanity, has chosen to work out in the outflowing actions of creation and redemption, to empty divinity not just within himself but outside himself, into our world and our lives, as if emptying an endless vessel of love into the hearts of those who try to ignore that very love in Christ himself.

God's self giving shows us that to be divine is to be identified with the last and not the first, the lowest and not the greatest in worldly terms: it is the fullest outpouring of love which is found and demonstrated in the face of those whom the world calls poor, it is the true riches of the gospel which are felt when we truly know the need of those around us.

When we give freely, give of ourselves in love to others, give of ourselves in prayer and worship to God, our own supply of love is not endless. We create space, which others can fill. God empties himself endlessly to pour himself into your life, to fill that space with the truth that is his love. Let us give all that we can, of our means, of ourselves, of our lives, let us take St Paul at his word, and truly have the mind of Christ.