

27th Sunday of the Year

Harvest Festival 2021

Mark 10.2-16

One of my favourite Oxford stories concerns a confirmation class being held for choristers at Magdalen College. This was about thirty five years ago, and the confirmands were not undergraduate choral scholars, but boys from the choir who were, I suppose, about eleven or twelve. The college chaplain was discussing what it means to believe in God, and he asked them whether any of them knew the word which described a person unsure about God's existence. This isn't someone who believes in God, he said, but it isn't someone who definitely doesn't believe in God. It's someone who is unsure. There was silence, so he gave them a clue, and said "It's a word beginning with A". One of the boys put his hand up and ventured the priceless answer "Is it "Anglican"?"

Out of the mouths of babes. When Jesus commends children as the perfect example of how to receive the kingdom, he is not talking about blind faith, nor about an inability to question. He is talking about the simplicity and trust which ought to be the attitude of us all. Too often, especially in a university city, questions of faith can be lost amid complexity, and however intellectually interesting that complexity might be, it is a different thing from the exploration of faith, because faith, as least as an ideal, is about simplicity and about acceptance.

Much of what the church does is designed to maintain this attitude of trust. Acknowledging the gifts of God in creation by celebrating the harvest is a very basic Christian act, one which engages us in a corporate act of thanksgiving and a corporate commitment to the goodness of the created world which God has given. In a city centre church such as this one, it would be wrong to pretend that we have much notion of our dependence upon the harvest. While we sing harvest

hymns and try to offer what we can in terms of food or resources to others, we are mostly in the extraordinarily privileged position of not worrying whether we have enough food, or what deprivations winter might bring. The disruption we are seeing in our country at the moment is, among other things, a salutary reminder of just how much we take for granted.

Creation is, by definition, that which we take for granted, because creation in Christian theology simply means everything there is. Or, more precisely, everything there is, that is not God, for the existence of God is the source of everything there is. It is thus rather harder to talk about creation than we might think. There is, for example, no point of comparison for everything there is. As soon as I compare creation with something else, I am separating that something else from creation. But nothing can be separated from creation, for creation is everything there is. You see the problem.

At the same time, creation and faith go very strongly hand in hand. Living as those who acknowledge God means living with the assumption, the acceptance, of creation – our dependence on God, not just for everything about ourselves, but for everything there is. Here is where the children of our gospel reading come in again – it is their simplicity and their ability to learn which shows the rest of us how we ought to think about and respond to the reality of creation. Our complete and ultimate dependence, upon God and the things that God has made, should be the first thing we acknowledge when we think about the world around us. In the same gospel passage, Jesus' emphasis on the God as creator lies at the heart of his challenging teaching on marriage – the ideal for fallen humanity remains the life in relationship – the giving and receiving of love – which is modelled on the eternal self-giving of the Trinity. That giving and receiving can exist and flourish in all sorts of different relationships and contexts, but married, single, widowed, divorced, gay, straight, whatever - the

primacy of love as the basis of all that exists is the principle which gives meaning to our lives.

God's gift in creation is just that, a gift, the infinite outflow of love which pours life into the world. We who celebrate that life are called to return that gift of love, of ourselves and of our means. It's an unfortunate annual coincidence that this church's Dedication Festival and financial gift day falls in October, at just the time when we are welcoming all sorts of new people to Oxford and to our church. The last thing a new worshipper wants to hear is a sermon which says "Give us your money", and so the good news is that you will all be spared it. The bad news is that the appeal will come round by email.

Giving of ourselves as part of the offering of creation is something much more than financial. It is an attitude, a disposition towards the created order which lines us up in accordance with the will of God. Tomorrow the church celebrates the Feast of St Francis of Assisi, a

saint rightly celebrated for embodying that attitude of faith and trust and joy in the created order. For Francis, the celebration of creation is not something separate from the love of Christ, quite the opposite. It is the physicality of the love of God, poured out in the gifts of creation and the glories of nature, lived out in the suffering of Christ embraced and undergone for the transformation of that broken and beautiful world, which is the heart of the Franciscan gospel.

Thanksgiving for the goodness of God in the abundance which we are so privileged to enjoy, can never be true thanksgiving if it is removed from the reality of that passionate love. God saw his creation, and it was very good, but God did not and does not admire from a distance. The scandal of human need and want, as much a scandal on our own doorstep as in the strife-torn areas of the world, that scandal remains the stumbling block against which Jesus warns us in the gospel. Those who would enter the kingdom of heaven should seek the childlike innocence Jesus

commends. But even that innocence must walk the way of the cross and so cannot be inured from the realities of suffering, or from our brothers and sisters whose agonies cry out to their creator. If the sun and the moon are my brother and sister, and they are says Francis, how much greater is my obligation to the kinsfolk who are just like me, whose trials and perils and exploitation could and can so easily be mine. These are the brethren Jesus owns, as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us. These are the brethren whom we take for granted even as we consume the fruits of creation so unjustly and unequally distributed.

What, then, is our harvest? Someone suggested this week that the harvest of this church is clergy, given how many ordinands we produce. I hope that's only partly true. Celebrating the gifts of God in creation, knowing our essential dependence, on God and on others, for the flourishing of our lives, these are the acceptance, the trust, which is ours in the God of life.

At their heart, what they all mean is that we know ourselves to be loved, loved in creation, loved in salvation – infinitely, bafflingly, passionately. What the idea of creation ultimately teaches is that only love is truly creative, only love brings something from nothing. The harvest of God is thus the harvest of us all, for God has created us to live out the gift of his love.