

SERMON – 4 OCTOBER 2020 – Isaiah 5.1-7, Matthew 21.33 – end

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The first bite of a Harvest Festival and the Gospel takes us to a vineyard. A vineyard takes a lot of work, the planting, fencing, all the work to grow a decent vine, to harvest wonderful, succulent grapes, then to dig the wine press, to press the grapes, to make the wine – and a watch-tower built for security. This vineyard is valuable, a lot of time and effort has been spent, it has great potential. Tenants found – and there is no suggestion that they weren't thought to be good tenants, checked tenants, you don't just rent your vineyard to anyone.

Harvest time comes, and the landlord sends slaves to take his produce, his rent. The tenants rebel, and kill the slaves. Pretty drastic this – and in those days no police force and justice system. So he sent more slaves – no doubt quite a military force. They are treated in the same way. So the owner decides to send his son – “They will respect my son” he says. But they don't – “they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

We know the security of our property. We have the protection of Law. On the occasions when our property is broken in to, we have felt violated and afraid, but when it happened in Bury, I was fortunate that I felt the police, my neighbour, and Ecclesiastical Insurance were on my side. I am a landlord, and sometimes feel my tenants are a pain, but I have an agent on my side, and I have never had anything major to worry about.

You could, of course, turn this parable around – and wonder why the tenants were so angry. Did they feel that they were being ill-used, doing all the work, and their landlord taking too much. You get to the end of a long, hard harvest. You've worked for ages producing a wonderful wine, and the landlord wants most of it. Is that fair? If we were a congregation of people who live in rented accommodation, in poor rented accommodation, if we were tenants in Grenfell Tower or any of the tower blocks that are still unsafe across our country, how would we feel about this parable? Nothing is ever as it seems.

We know that Jesus is telling his story about God, about himself, about God and his relationship with his people, the Jews. He's picking up the prophecy of Isaiah – and the crowd listening to Jesus would have made the connection. We read this story in a particular way. There is God who gave his people so much. God who gave his people a fertile land, gifts that needed working with, working on, but gifts all the same. He travelled and journeyed with his people – indeed, he wasn't just a God who turned up at harvest to collect the rent – but the

people did not want to know. They were not willing to pay what was due, not willing to work with him, not grateful – indeed, they were angry. God had his place, humanity has theirs’ – and humanity does not wish to accept it, humanity will fight against it.

Ever since Adam and Eve, humanity has wanted more than we deserve. From almost the very beginning evil is part of humanity – and humans will do horrendous things. They will beat a fellow human being, they will kill another, they will stone. We cannot understand how a group of human beings can throw rocks at other people, and watch the pain and suffering, and blood and fear. We cannot understand it – but we know it happens, and, there have been times in the 25 years of doing this job, that I have had people talk to me about the evil they have committed, evil I wouldn’t have believed.

Harvest Festival may be the celebration of all that is good, the celebration of nature, of farming, of all good gifts around us, a celebration of God and his love. But humans do not always celebrate, do not always give thanks – and they kill the representatives of God, they kill God’s son himself.

Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, and they know that he is talking about them. They know he is someone special, they must be aware that God is at work in him, and yet – if they follow him, that will change everything. It will change their faith, their status, their religion – and they are not brave enough to do that. I am sure there is some guilt, there is some fear, and guilt and fear feed the anger - don’t they always?

They are warned that “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” – and that is a hard saying. For generations our church has been the cornerstone of our society, and it is hard when we’re no longer in that position. I understand how the Pharisees feel. I want to be the cornerstone, I want what I represent to be seen as the cornerstone – and it is hard. Last year we celebrated our Bicentenary and – even though the majority of the village came nowhere near us – enough did, that we felt central, important, the cornerstone of village life. I’ve spent 25 years of my ministry trying to get people into church – encouraging them to come for the big moments of life, building on that to bring them into a deeper faith. The last six months have seen that become impossible – and in my depressed moments, what has been the point of my ministry, what is the point now?

There’s also a challenge for us believers, is all this, is faith, our cornerstone? Have we made the effort to walk with Christ, to say our prayers, to read our bibles, to be men and women of faith, when church attendance has been curtailed? The honest answer is probably “sometimes” – we could all do better.

Does our faith depend on buildings, on singing, on community – or do we have a faith in Christ that is real, even though it is different? Can we find Christ in these confusing times – will we be able to find Christ in a Christmas which, unless anything changes, will be devoid of carols, of nativity figures on broomsticks, of packed churches and our role in the community cemented for another year?

I must admit that modelling myself on Hannah's tortoises and going to sleep for the next 6 months has a lot of appeal! But we can't, so we'll just do our best – good days and bad days, no doubt.

Today, 4 October, is the Feast of St Francis of Assisi – he died on this day in 1226. It is lovely that we have his festival day at harvest – with creation and the environment and everything he stood being important.

I've been doing a National Gallery course on art 1250 to 1400, so we've been doing the art of some of the northern/central Italian cities – one day I will get to Assisi. Francis was born in 1181 – his father was a cloth merchant who traded in France and had married a French wife (cross border European trade was important 850 year ago). There was an expectation that young Francesco would take over the family business, but he had a difficult childhood, difficult teenage years, and a very difficult relationship with his father. He joined the army, fought in a nasty war – and had a major disagreement with dad. One of the legends has it that he “borrowed” some cloth from father's warehouse and flogged it for some money to spend on a good purpose, they had a public row in the market place, which ended when Francis stripped off all his clothes and stormed off to embrace poverty. Tell that story in a school assembly and the kids think it's great!

One of the books says, and I quote, “he took to caring for disused churches and for the poor” – a reminder that holy places are important, as are the poor – he cared for people suffering from leprosy. Most of us would run a mile. Others came and joined him, so he produced a simple Gospel-based rule for them to live by. The Order grew, preaching to the witness of Christ through repentance and service, it emphasised the poverty of Christ, the necessity of poverty for its members. In embracing that poverty, and that love, people found a new depth of spirituality and service.

I must admit the people I have known who have been involved with the Franciscans have always been a bit deep and spiritual for me – we had a very holy huddle at the Cathedral and I wasn't one of the in crowd – but it would be good to try and find a book or a course which helps us understand more of his

views, teaching – it could fit in well with the green agenda we were trying to deepen before Covid.

Harvest is one of those festivals when the whole question of “creation” should be on our agenda (and I am well aware it should be on our agenda all the time). Yet, it’s not easy. I still remember a row after Harvest in a village church 20 years ago when one of our more radical younger people (which meant, of course, means someone in his 30s), a very intelligent teacher – he wrote some superb prayers which got deep into our stewardship of creation – and, in doing so, managed to upset half the farming community of our conservative village.

20 years later, a Derbyshire village seems somewhat divided about a new traffic scheme. Is it a good piece of planning to benefit the environment, to get us out of our cars and support the planet – or is it a pain in the backside?

My daughter and her friends with disabilities are furious about the ban on plastic straws – indeed my brother-in-law could not use a cup and had to use a straw – the word “tokenism” is being banded around. They also have a view on road closures, most of which have been planned with no consideration of the needs of disabled drivers – and don’t get them started on electric-scooters, especially e-scooters on the pavement (they don’t mix well with wheelchairs, guidedogs, etc). There was an e-scooter manufacturer on TV going on about their green credentials, how they’ll help save the planet – my daughter was not a happy bunny.

We all sat there during lockdown and said how wonderful it was that the roads were quiet, the air quality better, we could hear the birds. We were going to rebuild a better world. Sadly, the government didn’t get that memo.

Fortunately, others have. I got an email on Thursday

The University of Cambridge aims to divest from all direct and indirect investments in fossil fuels by 2030 as part of the University’s plan to cut its greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2038, more than a decade before the date set by the UK Government.

The £3.5 billion Cambridge University Endowment Fund – one of the biggest of its kind in Europe – intends to ramp up investments in renewable energy as it divests from fossil fuels.

The Vice-Chancellor referred “to a pressing environmental and moral need for action” – so let’s be positive.

We've seen a lot of rainbows over the last few months – let's end by reminding ourselves it is a sign of God's covenant with us

“I am giving you a sign of my covenant with you and with all living creatures, for all generations to come. I have placed my rainbow in the clouds. It is the sign of my covenant with you and with all the earth. When I send clouds over the earth, the rainbow will appear in the clouds.” Genesis 9.14

<https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/cambridge-to-divest-from-fossil-fuels-with-net-zero-plan?ucam-ref=home-carousel>

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