

Harvest Festival – Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> October

Joel 2:21-27

1 Timothy 6:6-10

Matthew 6:25-33

*(the links are to the photos shown on the screen in church)*

I love the fact that so many local schools use this building. Both for the things we organise – Journey to the Stable, the Easter Journey and Open the Book, and also for the things they organise themselves. In particular schools often want to use this building for their carol services and for their Harvest festivals.

Tomorrow, the children from Woodlands School will be here in church; on Tuesday the nursery and reception classes from St James will be here all celebrating the Harvest. Later we are visiting Cranmore School and the Nursery at Tidbury Green. All singing songs like Autumn leaves and Cauliflowers fluffy. All thanking God for what he has provided.

Years ago when I was Vicar in a much more rural church (or at least one that had much more rural roots), Harvest was just one of a number of agricultural festivals we celebrated. We blessed a plough on Plough Sunday at the start of the year, and we processed around the fields asking for God's blessing on them on Rogation Sunday in May. A recognition that the essentials for life all had their origin in God's provision and so we should pray and praise him.

And although our current context is very different, although very few of us grow any of our own food; although our shops seem to be full of food regardless of the season or the weather, we are doing essentially the same thing today. Thanking God for the things we need to live. Thanking God for food and clothing; for health and housing. And as a token we have brought offerings which will be given to those who don't have the essentials needed for life.

As we sing familiar hymns and bring forward our gifts today we possibly have images in mind of wheat fields ready for Harvest and trees heavy with fruit. As we imagine the catching of fish in the seas we possibly have in mind images of full and bulging nets.

<https://tinyurl.com/plenty-wheat>

<https://tinyurl.com/plenty-apples>

<https://tinyurl.com/plenty-fish>

But sadly in many parts of the world that is no longer the case.

Climate change is changing the land. Previously fertile land is turning to desert.  
Heavy rainfall is causing floods and washing soil away

<https://tinyurl.com/climate-change-effect>

And in the seas the ocean project is showing just how much plastic there is in the seas – affecting the health of the fish. In addition climate change is causing seas to warm, changing the

environment so some fish can no longer survive. And as we heard last week, corals are dying because of warmer water

<https://tinyurl.com/sea-plastic-haul>

None of these effects were planned. But they have all happened.

Last week in our Worship 4 Everyone service we were thinking about creation, and in particular its interconnectedness, its complexity – the way it all hangs together so perfectly. We heard the amazing story of the wolves in Yellowstone Park in the USA. Just to recap, in the 1920s wolves were hunted down so none were left in the park – there was a fear they would attack people. But this had the effect of causing a growing deer population that grazed on all the shrubs and trees, decimating the park and affecting other wildlife and the wider environment.

But in the 1990s the wolves were reintroduced - and the effect was incredible. The presence of the wolves changed the behaviour of the deer; they no longer lingered in the open, so trees had a chance to grow, which in turn encouraged birds and beavers and other wildlife. Less deer meant more chance for bears to feed on the berries they need; beavers' dams created new habitats for fish, amphibians, reptiles, and otters. The trees also stabilised the river banks, reducing erosion. In short, the park was transformed. You can find out more by watching one of the many videos on YouTube.

And its this same interconnectedness of the created world that is leading to the devastating effects of climate change – changing weather patterns, warmer seas, drier and infertile land. The plastic pollution we produce, the burning of fossil fuels releasing carbon which causes the earth to warm, the endangering of wildlife by the destruction of habitats have not been deliberate policies – they are the effects of other things we as humans have done as we have changed this complex and beautiful world.

Scripture tells us loudly and clearly that the world God made was beautiful, intricately ordered, with everything being good. In our gospel reading today Jesus alludes to this – he refers to God clothing the lilies and feeding the birds as an example to how we should trust in God that his creation supplies our needs. Its also clear from scripture that we as humans have been tasked by God to care for the created world, although too often we have simply used it and abused it.

But it all comes back to the same question we often ask ourselves when thinking of these issues. What can and should we do? Is there something like the reintroduction of Yellowstone wolves that will bring healing to the created world.

Our first thought might be to look to science, but I recently read this quote from Gus Speth, the founder and former president of the World Resources Institute

*"I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that."*

Selfishness – the desire to think not of others, but only of ourselves. In our heads we might know that we need to cut back on fossil fuel usage, but I want to fly away on holiday; I want a faster car; I'd rather be able to sit in my home in shirtsleeves than turn the thermostat down and put an extra jumper on. I'd rather buy the cheap item that causes damage to the environment than spend a few more pounds on something sustainable. I'd rather throw my plastic packaging away, knowing it will be exported to a third world country to "deal with" than change my purchasing habits.

Greed – in the recent election in the UK all the major parties talked about growth as if it would solve all our problems and the world's problems. Growth means wanting and having more and more. More and more possessions, more and more consuming, more and more use of natural resources and energy, more and more rubbish to dispose of. More and more disastrous effects like climate change and pollution and further ecosystem collapse.

Apathy – Yes I know what the issues are. We are using up resources; fossil fuels are causing climate change; our constant desire for more and more is causing further biodiversity loss; our insatiable desire and use of plastic is spreading the plastic pollution problem around the world. But I can't be bothered to change my ways; my little bit won't help and in any case I rather like living the way I do. It's too much effort to reuse, recycle and reduce. I'll do it when everyone else does or when I am forced to.

If the root problems really are selfishness, greed and apathy then a sermon is the right place to be addressing them, because they are spiritual issues. As Christians we are called to follow the teaching and example of Jesus in the way we live.

Jesus always thought of others before himself. On the cross he asked for forgiveness for those who had nailed him there; he never turned people away even when tired. He advocated sharing with those in need "if anyone takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt". His teaching in the parable of the sheep and goats is all about selflessness, putting others first.

It is not for nothing that greed is seen as one of the seven deadly sins, because whereas selfishness puts ourselves in God's place, greed essentially puts money or possessions in the place of God. Jesus told the rich young man he needed to sell his possessions; he said it was harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. He knew that greed, possessions and money get in the way of serving God. What we have (and what we want) becomes more and more important. And what's more it never leads to contentment. Ask a rich person what they need to be happy and they'll probably say just a little bit more than they currently have. In our second reading Paul had some sound advice for Timothy to pass on. *For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that*

Jesus was always ready and willing to act. Whether it was to perform a healing, to feed the people, to challenge religious leaders or to call others to follow him. His early followers recognised that they had to act in spreading the gospel message. There may have only been a few of them in number, but they weren't daunted by that. They knew their actions and their words would make a

difference. And through the ages huge movements have started from the actions of individuals or the few.

Maybe those thoughts will help us as we face up to the challenges of climate change and the ecological issues facing the world. If we act differently, if our motivations change, if we are prepared to put ourselves forward then things can change - starting with ourselves.

We can do without that cling film – there are other ways of preserving food; we don't need to but that plastic bottle of water; we can use public transport; there is an alternative to flying; We don't need more and more; we can share what we have with others who have less.

This Harvest festival as we thank God for his provision, let us offer him ourselves – let us seek to think more of others and the effect of our actions and inactions on them; let us seek contentment rather than possessions and let us promise to act where we can – even if it seems that our actions are small – because they will help to make a difference.