

## Harvest Festival Service (4 October 2020)

United Reformed Worship from the United Reformed Churches in Morpeth, Widdrington and Gt Bavington.

### Opening Words

Psalm 19:1-4

We come this morning to our Harvest Festival when we too offer up our voices in thanks and praise for the goodness of God's creation. Let us begin by singing Come Ye Thankful People Come.

### Hymn: Come ye thankful people come

#### Prayer of Approach

Father we thank you for the world in which you have placed us  
and for the way you have made us;  
for the beautiful things we can see and hear;  
and that we can enjoy all the good things you have given to us.

We praise you for mountains and for hills,  
for streams and for rivers,  
for plants and for animals;  
for fruit and for flowers;  
for the food we like to eat and the things which quench our thirst.  
We thank you for the different harvests all around us -  
for the harvest of the farm and the harvest of the sea;  
for the harvest of the garden and the harvest from under the ground; for the harvest of things that are made in huge factories and for the harvest of power that we use in our homes; for the harvest of things to learn; and the harvest of friendships to enjoy;  
for those whose harvest of love and care fills us with thankfulness and praise.

We thank you for Jesus and the love that he has given to us and for the way that he helps us to love one another;  
for reminding us that everything we see and hear belongs to you  
and is the harvest of your loving will.  
We thank you for the harvest of worship and

praise and thanksgiving  
that brings you glory and honours your name.

AMEN

*(Prayer taken from "500 more prayers for all occasions" by David Clowes)*

### Poem

Here among long-discarded cassocks,  
Damp stools, and half-split open hassocks,  
Here where the Vicar never looks  
I nibble through old service books.  
Lean and alone I spend my days  
Behind this Church of England baize.  
I share my dark forgotten room  
With two oil-lamps and half a broom.  
The cleaner never bothers me,  
So here I eat my frugal tea.  
My bread is sawdust mixed with straw;  
My jam is polish for the floor.  
Christmas and Easter may be feasts  
For congregations and for priests,  
And so may Whitsun. All the same,  
They do not fill my meagre frame.  
For me the only feast at all  
Is Autumn's Harvest Festival,  
When I can satisfy my want  
With ears of corn around the font.  
I climb the eagle's brazen head  
To burrow through a loaf of bread.  
I scramble up the pulpit stair  
And gnaw the marrows hanging there.  
It is enjoyable to taste  
These items ere they go to waste,  
But how annoying when one finds  
That other mice with pagan minds  
Come into church my food to share  
Who have no proper business there.  
Two field mice who have no desire  
To be baptized, invade the choir.  
A large and most unfriendly rat  
Comes in to see what we are at.  
He says he thinks there is no God  
And yet he comes...it's rather odd.  
This year he stole a sheaf of wheat  
(It screened our special preacher's seat),  
And prosperous mice from fields away  
Come in to hear the organ play,  
And under cover of its notes  
Ate through the altar's sheaf of oats.  
A Low Church mouse, who thinks that I

Am too papistical, and High,  
Yet somehow doesn't think it wrong  
To munch through Harvest Evensong,  
While I, who starve the whole year through,  
Must share my food with rodents who  
Except at this time of the year  
Not once inside the church appear.  
Within the human world I know  
Such goings-on could not be so,  
For human beings only do  
What their religion tells them to.  
They read the Bible every day  
And always, night and morning, pray,  
And just like me, the good church mouse,  
Worship each week in God's own house,  
But all the same it's strange to me  
How very full the church can be  
With people I don't see at all  
Except at Harvest Festival.  
*(Sir John Betjeman - poet Laureate from 1972  
until his death in 1984.)*

### Reflection

I love Betjeman's poem because I think it is so evocative of the harvest festival that have been a feature of the church for many years. However, perhaps our harvest festival today has rather slim pickings for such church mouse, and the crowds of people coming to the church to celebrate harvest are sadly not allowed due to current COVID restrictions.

The poem is of course a satirical look at the life of the church and the church mouse is used to remind us of the state of the church today. The church mouse finds himself among the discarded hassocks, damp stools and half-split open cassocks, The church has become a place of dark forgotten gloom and there is little throughout the year to feed the church mouse.

At the Harvest Festival the mouse suddenly finds himself sharing the church with pagan mice who have no business in church, others with no intention of being baptised, still more coming to listen to the organ play and even atheists who come to see what can be gleaned from the church.

I am not sure that today we recognise these masses that Betjeman refers to that flood into our churches at Whitsun and Harvest. But the meaning of the poem still remains true and we can recognise the emphasis of this poem that talks of those whose worship is not sincere, and who come and celebrate the festivals without any real regard to worshipping God in their lives.

But of course the poem points out too the piety of this church mouse - who grudges those who come into the church once a year, and looks down on those who do not worship week in week out in the church like he does. The mouse in the poem represents the type of people Betjeman was critical of. The mouse itself is not concerned with any of the religious aspects of the church but more with its own status within the church. The mouse is hypocritical of the people who come to the church, as they come not for worship, but to satisfy themselves. And yet it is only in satisfying itself, that remains the prime occupation of this church mouse.

It is perhaps this sort of piety that Jesus condemns the Chief Priests and Pharisees of when he share with them the parable in our reading this morning.

**Reading: Matthew 21:33-46**

**Hymn: 621 Almighty Father who for us thy son**

### Sermon

A few years ago they did some research to find the funniest joke - and do you know what topped all the tests as being the funniest? Well it goes a little like this:

*Two men went hunting in the forest.  
Suddenly one of them dropped down to the ground and lay there, not moving. The other, fortunately, had his mobile phone. He phoned the emergency services. 'I need some help,' he said. 'I've come out hunting with my friend. We're in the middle of the forest. And he's collapsed. I think he's dead. What do I do?'*

*The operator on the phone said, 'Well the first thing to do, is to make sure that he's dead.' The operator heard the hunter put the phone down. There was a pause, then a loud bang. Then the hunter's voice said, 'Okay. He's definitely dead. Now what do I do?'*

I think for me what makes that joke, and most jokes quite funny, is the surprise ending. The story does not end up the way you think its going to. And I guess when Jesus was telling the parable of the tenants in the vineyard, it was the surprise ending to the story that would have made such an impact on those who were listening.

Jesus' audience would have been used to stories about vineyards. A vineyard has been a potent symbol through the history of the Jewish people and one that would have been very familiar with.

In Isaiah, some 700 years before Jesus spoke these words, was recounting the song of the Vineyard to the Jewish nation. Isaiah says: "I will sing of the one I love, a song about his vineyard, my loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up, cleared it of stones And planted it with choicest vines, he built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for crop of good grapes but it yielded only bad fruit."

The next chapters of Isaiah, how the people of Israel are that vineyard and how God is disappointed with the fruits they have yielded. And yet Isaiah is promise that God will not turn his back on them, but they will face suffering, but that God will not turn away from them, and that they will always be his people.

When Jesus begins with his parable, he is speaking to the chief priests and Pharisees, the religious leaders of Israel. And he reminds them:

"There was a landowner, who planted a vineyard, he put a wall around it, dug a

winepress in it, and built a watchtower." They would have known instantly the Isaiah references and the promise that God will not turn his back on them. For they are the vineyard, and a wall has indeed been built around Jerusalem so keep it safe, and the Temple the watchtower in the centre. Isaiah's prophesy has indeed proved true.

If they thought that this story was going to end well for them, then in the next few words Jesus puts them on their guard. Jesus says "Then he **rented** the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place"

What could this mean?

Well, firstly that the famers in the vineyard, the leaders of God's people Israel, were only short-term tenants, and had no rights of ownership.

And secondly, that God had moved to another place.

Jesus then tells of the servants sent by the owner sent to collect the fruits that had been grown. The prophets, like Isaiah, whom God had sent to the leaders Israel to collect some of the good things that had come from them. And how those prophets were rejected and beaten and killed and God received nothing for his investment.

And then after repeated attempts to collect some of the harvest, the owner finally decides to send his own Son. Who is subsequently thrown out of the vineyard and killed.

We know the significance of this. The son is of course Jesus, and when he tells this story it is just a few days before his death. Jesus has entered the city on a donkey on Palm Sunday, he has driven the money changers from the temple, and it is clear that the Chief Priest and Pharisees will in just a few days find a way to arrest Jesus and arrange for him to be killed.

In a twist to the comforting words of Isaiah, Jesus says "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants who will give him a share of the crop at harvest time.....the Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people

who will produce its fruit.” Jesus says your lease will come to an end, and my disciples, the people who know about God’s kingdom will be then ones who will lead God’s people. And we are told, that when the Chief Priests and Pharisees heard Jesus’ parable, they knew he was talking about them.

God speaks into their heart, and they hear the truth. They are convicted by what they hear. They know it is God speaking directly to them. But still they looked for a way to arrest him, and would become instrumental in his death.

When we listen to the parables today, we too need to know that Jesus is speaking about us. We need to be convicted in the same way, and hear God speaking directly to us, through this parable.

So what might God be saying today? Well as we celebrate our harvest today, it seems significant that the passage is talk about a harvest of the fruits of the vineyard.

We can see this in a spiritual sense. That God has lavished his goodness on us, he was given us everything we need, and looks to us to yield the fruit of the kingdom. Fruit that Paul describes in his letter to the Galatians, such as love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. When God looks at how fruitful we are, does he find fruits that he is able to harvest.

We can also see this in a very physical sense too. That God has provided all we need, and from this land, in one way or another, we have satisfied ourselves. Much as that church mouse in Betjeman’s poem, we have lived within the safety of God’s protection and have found all we have needed for ourselves. But knowing the abundance of which we have been blessed, we are called not to keep it all to ourselves, but to offer some back to God, so that others may be fed. When the other mice come into the church to take some of this abundance, the church mouse is offended, rather feeling he is entitled to it all.

Is this a message that is for us as we listen to the parable today?

There is a story told of two people sitting in front of one big cake. One of them cut it into two so that there was one big piece and one small piece. The other reached out and took the largest piece. The first person said - 'If I'd been you, I would have taken the smallest piece.' The second one looked at him and said, 'What's the problem? You've got the smallest piece!'

We have to recognise that in our lives, we all too often take the largest share, and are content to let others take the smallest piece. Paul McMahon in his book *Feeding Frenzy* says "We grow enough food today to feed 9.3 billion people. It is just that a lot is wasted and a lot more diverted towards animal feed and biofuels. This is why it is so shocking that 870 million people still go hungry."

We cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that we live among the wealthiest nations, and that globally we enjoy bumper harvests while others around the world still struggle for food to eat. When we hear the parable that Jesus speaks, we cannot help but see that we are in some ways those tenant farmers who enjoy all the harvest for ourselves, and turn away those God sends to collect their share. Like those in Jesus story of the sheep and goats, we will say "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty?" To which the reply is "Whatever you did not do for the least of these you did not do for me."

And it is not just globally where people are hungry, but in this country, and in our own community too. Between 2003 and 2011 during this time of austerity and recession, food insecurity (the situation of people not being able to feed themselves or their families) rose from 4.2% to 8.8% of the population and it has continue to rise since then. Trussell Trust, one of the largest Food Bank organisations in the country, gave out 68, 486 food parcels in 2011, and 1.6 million food parcels in 2019.

At this harvest time we as a church are supporting our own local foodbank, the Wansbeck Valley FoodBank. In 2019 they feed 7000 individuals who were given on average 3 days worth of food. In total £133,000 of food was given to those unable to feed themselves or their families at this time. We are not taking any food donations this year, because of the obvious COVID 19 restrictions, but we still want to support the work of the FOODBANK and are asking you this harvest to make a financial donation to allow them to source the food they need and to continue their operations. The details of how you can donate will be in the description book of the video of this service, and we will post details on our facebook site, or of course, you can leave a donation in the appropriate plate in the foyer as you leave this morning. If you have been given donations into our charity bucket too during the year, then we will be adding any of these donations towards what we give to the FOOD BANK this Harvest.

Hopefully, in this small way, we can recognise all that God has done for us, and with grateful hearts offer back to God something of that which we have harvested. Hopefully we can re-cut the cake so that there is a more even distribution of resources among us. And hopefully there will be evidence of the fruits of the Kingdom which will indeed be pleasing to God.

#### **Prayers of Intercession**

Lord of the harvest,  
We have heard your word today  
and we reminded of the care and concern  
that we are required to show to all those  
you have created and to the world in which we  
live.

We confess that we have not always  
lived in ways that are acceptable to you,  
that selfishness and greed have played  
a part in our lives, and we have not loved our  
neighbours  
we have loved ourselves.

This harvest time we come with thankful hearts  
to offer you praise for all the good things you given  
to us,  
and to offer back something of that which we have

received  
to others who have taken a smaller slice.

We pray today especially for the work of the  
WANSBECK VALLEY FOODBANK, especially at this  
time,  
when more and more are struggling to earn  
a reasonable wage, we pray that our gifts and our  
prayers  
may help those who are in need to receive all that  
they need. And that we may help in supporting the  
word of the FOODBANK and directing others to  
receive the help they so desperately need.

We pray for those whose lives are affected by  
climate change. we recognise that the lifestyles we  
lead have an affect on others around the world  
that we are ignorant of,  
and whose circumstances have mean little to us.  
We pray that through the small changes we can  
make  
to our lifestyles, we can each have a global effect,  
so that creation can start to heal itself  
and others can grow the crops they need to  
survive.

We pray for those who are starved of those  
spiritual fruits,  
the fruits of your kingdom.  
For those who are starved of love and compassion,  
of generosity, and friendship,  
or tenderness and consolation.  
May we, who have been blessed by these things,  
look to share with others that which we have in  
abundance  
through your good grace and not to keep them all  
to ourselves.  
Amen

We offer our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ,  
who taught us to say together

#### **The Lord's Prayer**

Hymn: 124 We plough the fields and scatter

Blessing