

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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HARVEST

1st October 2017

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

When I was cycling on my recent holiday, I saw a lot of beautiful sights, and some strange ones. On the Saturday, I saw the sea sparkling around the island of Gigha, and nearby I saw a red triangular road sign which seemed to be warning me of the presence of alligators or crocodiles. I did not find any large lizards crossing the road, however! But road signs are there to inform us, so that we don't get lost – the signs of the national cycle routes are very small, so that only those looking for them at cycling speed are likely to notice them – and road signs are there to warn us. And sometimes, so eager are the authorities to inform us, it can seem that your journey is just one danger after another – skid risk, and double bend, falling rocks, then hump-backed bridge and so on and so on. And that is OK when we know where we are going and the sun is shining, but when the road is unfamiliar and the rain is falling or the sky darkened with clouds, well, then it can seem a little like a metaphor for life.

Because we all know those times when life is a bit dark and gloomy, and we find ourselves dealing with one challenge after another- illness, bereavement, problems with family or work. Times when it becomes hard to cope. Times when we are likely to become worried and irritable if we are not careful.

At times like that, gratitude or thanksgiving are the last things on our mind. But today, we find ourselves hearing part of the instructions for the people of Israel to celebrate their harvest thanksgiving festival. These are instructions for a farming community, in the days when the vast majority of the people lived off the land. So the command was not that you gave money (as we do week by week in church nowadays), but that you gave a share of the produce of your farm to God- the first part of the crop to be placed in a basket and offered to God.

The ancient Israelite harvest festival didn't just celebrate God's gift of the harvest. It was really to celebrate that God had freed Israel from slavery in Egypt, and that God brought the people to the land flowing with milk and honey. So these instructions about harvest offerings end with the words: 'Be grateful for the good things the Lord your God has given you...'

The general purpose of today, of our Harvest Festival, is to meditate on God's good gifts to us, and how we, too, might make an appropriate response. But some of you might feel that your life today is a bit like going along a wee, narrow, dangerous road, like many of our roads, and that you keep coming across signs of challenges, dangers, uncertainties and difficulties. When life is not so good, how can we feel grateful?

Well, start by thinking of what you take for granted. Our harvest food gifts are going to the Ness Bank Church for their "Inverness Foodstuff" programme of cooking to feed people who would not otherwise have a good, nourishing meal. We rarely think

about how it comes to our table, or about the work of people across the world who bring it to our us. But most of us here are used to plentiful and safe food- unlike most people in our world. It is interesting, and moving, to hear from my daughter, Jennifer, as she reflects on what she sees in Ghana, which is not the poorest of the poor countries of the world. She is seeing that most people eat the same food day in and day out, and it is filling but not interesting. She is seeing that cleanliness can be viewed as a luxury.

We can use the news of events in our world to help us be thankful (as well as to lead us to pray for others). Over recent years we have seen people fleeing from war zones, masses of people crammed on trains, walking along motorways, sleeping in railway stations and makeshift refugee camps, sinking in the Mediterranean. Most of us, however, are used to easy, fast travel. A late train or a delayed flight gets us annoyed. Maybe we could remember that we have much to be thankful for.

Many of those on the move across the world are fleeing places which have been devastated by war. A few of you have lived through war, but for most of us, all we know is what we see when we see TV pictures of cities in ruins. What must it be like to live in places that have been on the receiving end of today's high-tech firepower? The damage done to cities by modern warfare mean that the people who live in these places cannot do simple things we are used to, like switching a switch and getting electricity, getting water at the turn of a tap, lifting the phone and getting through first time, or even going to the shop and buying food. All things we can do, all things that we can be thankful for on a daily basis, no matter what else is going on in our lives.

Although poverty and hardship exists in our country, most of us are materially very well off. Although we worry about crime, our communities are basically peaceful. So perhaps, indeed, we ought to still hear the instruction of Deuteronomy: 'Be grateful for the good things the Lord your God has given you...'

And so we ought to give thanks. And as we do so, we should remember in our prayers those who have little - the victims of war; the peasant farmers who struggle to feed their families, the folks in our own communities who cannot feed their families and who need the Ness Bank programme or the Foodbank, or both, to survive. We pray, because we believe in a God who stands alongside those who suffer and struggle. As the ancient Israelites were told to remember: "We cried to the Lord, the god of our ancestors and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression." God sees and knows and stands alongside those who suffer.

Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

The idea of planting for a harvest is one which is used a lot in the Bible, not only to rejoice in God's provision, as in our first reading, but also to provide a way of looking at God's work in the world and in our lives. Thinking only of the New Testament, we could have read several of Jesus' parables – the parable of the sower, where the four different kinds of soil the seed falls on, refer to the different way that we can receive the seed of God's word so that it grows and flourishes in our lives – or not. Or we could have read the parable of the wheat and the tares, where the good seed is over-sown, by "an enemy" with weeds (not that I need to sow weeds in my garden – it manages a fine weed crop all on its own!). And this is a message about how good and evil will always go side by side in the world until God reaps his harvest at the end of time. Or we could have read the short parable about the Kingdom of God being like seed sown secretly, which no one knows how it grows, but at the end it pro-

duces a crop and a harvest. Everyone in Jesus' day knew about planting and reaping, so Jesus used these metaphors a lot.

Or we could have read in Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he likens the good that God grows in our lives to fruit – the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. But, of course we didn't read any of these things, we read about the dispute within the church at Corinth, the dispute over whether it was better to have heard the good news from Paul or Apollos. Christian churches do manage to fall out about the most trivial and pointless of things! What does it matter who told you the good news about God's love in Jesus, so long as someone did? And Paul uses a gardening metaphor and says, that he planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the growth. God gives the growth, that is what matters.

It is true when we talk about the crops that grow in gardens and fields. We plant and we even water sometimes, but we can't make the seed grow. When I planted my favourite – and usually most reliable – broad beans this spring, we then had that wonderful warm May. Remember May? When people say we had no summer this year, I think about May! It was warm and it was dry, and so I watered my plants and seeds. But although I watered, and I thought I watered quite well, I discovered that the soil was so dry that even when my watering made a puddle, the moisture was just sitting on top of the dry soil, and was not sinking down. So maybe my beans were not going to grow after all. (They did: the rest of the wet summer took care of them nicely.)

We usually get some kind of a harvest, even if some years are better for some crops than others. Other parts of the world live with a lot more uncertainty about whether or not they will have a reward for the work of sowing. But the uncertainty of the harvest is what reminds us that we cannot do, cannot manage, cannot live on our own. God gives the growth. God gives what we need for life, whether it is our physical life, sustained by our physical harvest, for which God be praised; or whether it is our inner life, you might call it our spiritual life, sustained by God's Spirit, given us by Jesus' death and resurrection, for which God be praised. God gives the growth.

Of course, if we do not do our bit, our digging, loosening the soil, our fertilizing, digging in the manure or compost, our weeding, keeping the wrong kinds of growth away, our staking, if it is a tall kind of crop – if we do not do our bit, our fields and gardens will yield less and less each year. God gives the growth, but he gives it better when we can work with him. And if we do not do our bit in our lives then we cannot expect God to give us such great growth in our growing to be like Jesus, our growing to be God's children. We need to help him by allowing the planting and watering that Paul refers – by listening to those who are able to teach us. We need to do the weeding, by keeping harmful influences and habits out of our lives. We need to do the staking, being ready to serve other in love, looking out for the opportunities before they come our way – you stake before the plant is big enough to need it.

But God gives the growth. God takes what we do, and God graciously works despite our inattention or laziness, and he gives the growth. He grows in us the fruit of his Spirit, he grows through us the life of his church. For all the growth that God gives, in the world and in human lives, we thank him. We acknowledge our need of him, and thank him that he gives the growth. Amen.