



Neighbours in Creation

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Reading: John 6. 25-35 and reflections from the International Committee

‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?’

The crowds who come following after Jesus want more. ‘What more are you going to give us then?’

Today as we celebrate harvest we too might look at our world and see the way that we live and recognise that same desire for more. Rather than a spirit of thanksgiving and gratitude for the gifts of creation, for the diversity of life that we share, a celebration of our interdependence and reliance on one another across our globe - that is the very essence of what it means to be human, to be neighbours, to be friends - we recognise an insatiable hunger for more, a restlessness, a desire to ignore the needs or existence of our neighbour, as we seek our own needs, look beyond what we have with a desire to accumulate more.

The question we hear today might be: What more are you going to do before we change the ways we act so that we live as people who believe in the gift of creation and really care for our earth? What more can you show us before we truly live as neighbours in creation, open to the gift of one another, truly concerned for one another?

The answer Jesus gives the crowd is to be aware of what they already have been given, and the possibilities that are open to them now. All that they need they have. They simply have to believe in the one who gives it. We hear that they have already received the sign, in the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 that comes earlier in this chapter of John’s Gospel. They have already tasted the goodness of God. What they seek is available to them now, real and present in the person of Jesus, if only they will take time to perceive it.

The answer is the same for us this harvest. Look around you and see what you have already been given. Be aware of what is around you now and cherish it. Take time to receive and be nourished by it. The earth, the gifts of creation, the relationships you have, the possibilities for life and flourishing.

At the Gandhi lecture this week Rowan Williams spoke about the need to take time to know each other, to be patient with strangers, to truly listen to the other so that we can understand them, immerse ourselves in their experience so that we can speak for the other without distortion, so that we can speak justly for where they stand¹. Spending time getting to know one another, so that we can truly be aware of what they experience, means we have to be open to the mystery of the other, to truly take on board that they are different from us, not just see them through our own eyes and prejudices and desires, take time to get to know them in patient trustfulness.

This patient giving of time to the other is a way to our own growth and flourishing and well-being because we begin to trust that others can come to know us and speak for us and affirm our place in the world and in creation.

Here in this community, this harvest we are invited to give time and attention to our global neighbours that we support through the International Committee, two of which you have heard about this morning; St Luke’s Hospital in Malawi and the Patashala School, Hyderabad, in India.

¹ <http://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/podcasts/>

And the international committee invites us to pray for these and four other projects and communities over the coming weeks –and this is all detailed in the beautiful leaflet you will have received as you came in which includes prayers to help you².

As we've already heard in the two short reflections this morning, patient attentiveness and commitment brings life and flourishing and surprising abundance, in the development of dedicated and compassionate staff, in the education of children living in extreme poverty, in the unexpected generosity of gifts left on a doorstep. This week we are also renewing our relationship with St Mary's Cathedral in Johannesburg, as Richard Carter and Mike Wooldridge spend time with the community there, following the visit of Fr Delwati, the Dean of the cathedral to this church last year. We hope that one of the outcomes of this partnership will be that we will help to grow their social outreach and youth work. In all of these relationships and projects we aim to get to know our International Neighbours better, focus on the issues they face, learn from them and come to know Christ more through them.

How is it in this patient attentiveness to our relationships, to the beauty of our earth, to our neighbours that we meet and are nourished by Christ? It is because we believe that Jesus is so involved in the life of the world, in creation, in our neighbour, that as we believe, and live his life, fully engaged with our world, with compassion and generosity, we open ourselves to his transforming life within us. He becomes the 'living bread' for us.

Like the Samaritan women earlier in John's Gospel³, who meets Jesus at the well in the heat of the day and asks him to give her the 'living water' that he speaks of, so the crowd in this scene ask for the bread that Jesus tells them 'gives life to the world.' 'Sir, give us this bread always', they say. They know this bread he offers is something more than that given to their ancestors by Moses, but like her they struggle to understand that it is Jesus himself, standing before them, who is this bread - the source of nourishment and life, the one who connects them to the life of the father forever. Jesus tells them that all their hunger and longing are met in him - a living and present reality. For those who come to him Jesus brings an end to all hunger and thirst.

Stephen Verney in his beautiful book about John's Gospel 'Water into Wine'⁴ says what Jesus is telling them is; 'If you want to satisfy your real hunger and renew your real vigour, then let go of your own will, and do the will of my Father who sent me.' The love of Jesus, shared for all, is the bread that gives life to the world. The food is the one who actually does it. 'It is like saying,' he says 'that my love is not an abstract idea of love, but is my wife.' God's bread for the world, God's love, is Jesus.

Perhaps this harvest you are hungry and thirsty. Hungry for someone's attention to the issues you face, hungry for justice for a situation that troubles you, thirsty for space and peace in your life because you are driven by the demands of your job, or the expectations that others put upon you. Hungry for real conversation and connection, in a world that just doesn't stop and rushes by. Thirsty to hear good news, when you are overwhelmed by the trauma and conflict being faced around our world. Hungry for a society that honours and cares for the weakest amongst us as much as the strongest, wealthiest and smartest, and a world that welcomes the stranger, rather than fears them. Thirsty for someone to talk to you as if you really mattered for who you are and not just for what you do.

Bring this hunger and thirsting into how you do God's will in the world, in your relationships with your neighbours in creation, in your loving and compassion and caring.

We receive the bread, and satisfy our own hunger, by doing the will of God. We are invited, like the crowd looking for another sign, simply to receive Jesus's life and enter into the loving relationship of God for all his creation.

² <http://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/news/parish-news/who-is-my-international-neighbour/>

³ John 4. 7-42

⁴ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Water-into-wine-Stephen-Verney/dp/0992685613>

And as you receive this life and enter into this relationship you will find that you too are living God's love and justice. And as your hunger is satisfied, you will find that you too become bread for the world; Bread for your neighbours in creation; Helping to bring God's harvest home.