

Harvest 2023

Abundance, Justice, Generosity, Moderation

St Brandon's

Psalm 65; 2 Cor. 9: 6-end; Luke 12: 16-30

24 September 2023

A Harvest sermon in just four words: abundance, justice, generosity, moderation. But it may take me rather more than four words to explain. If you like mnemonics as a way to remember things (but then, who does remember sermons?), then the first letters of the four words – AJGM – sound a bit like AGM (with a long G). And harvest is a little like an AGM(!) – a chance to review and give thanks, a chance to look forward. Well enough beating about the bush (to coin a phrase vaguely relevant to harvest!).

Abundance! Psalm 65: “You (God) visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it ... You water its furrows abundantly ... You crown the year with your bounty ... The pastures of the wilderness (yes, even the wilderness) overflow ... the meadows clothe themselves with flocks ... the valleys deck themselves with grain.” Get the point? It is, as we are told in the very first chapter of the Bible (Gen. 1: 31), that “God saw all that He had made and, indeed, it was very good.”

And Jesus begins His parable about the rich man by saying that his land produced *abundantly*. He was the recipient of the abundance of God in creation. And so are we. In our reading from 2 Corinthians it says, “And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance” (v.8). *Every* blessing – not just material things, but anything and everything by which we may be blessed, and in abundance – God is not a mean or miserly God, but delights to share His abundance with us.

And that's the point behind Jesus's teaching in the second part of our Gospel reading. Consider the ravens who don't do anything, and yet have plenty. Consider the lilies which neither toil nor spin, and yet are clothed in a glory that even Solomon couldn't match. God knows our needs – for food and drink and clothing and so on – and He provides abundantly for all this stuff.

So, Jesus continues ... stop worrying! Why waste time and energy on worry when our gracious heavenly Father knows what we need and will provide it in abundance? “Do not keep worrying” is almost a command that Jesus gives us as part of His teaching in response to the abundance of God.

Do you remember the advertising campaign back in 2008 backed by the prominent atheist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and the organisation Humanists UK, based around the message ‘There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and start enjoying your life’? Well, of course, they got it almost completely right. It just needed to start differently, ‘There almost certainly is a God. Now stop worrying and start enjoying your life’!

But. What if you, or those millions of people in this country, or billions of people around the world, do not experience it that way? What about those who worry about feeding their

children, let alone themselves. What about those who worry about eviction because they cannot afford the rent? What about those already evicted and on the streets, or those whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed by earthquake, flood, war and have no idea what the future may hold? How could Jesus's command to stop worrying possibly apply to them?

Now is not the time to get into a deep analysis of all of this. But harvest, when we give thanks for the abundance of God, is also a time to question how we've managed to get ourselves, as a country, as a world, into such a situation of deep and, it seems, entrenched poverty and inequality. Leave aside natural disasters, which would take at least another sermon, how have we managed to create an economic system where many are excluded from jobs, many have such low paid jobs that in-work poverty is at scandalous levels, and an economic system where exploitation and modern slavery, as it's called, are rife?

Of course people in such situations worry – the mental health effects of poverty and exploitation are often as devastating as the material effects. And what they need primarily is not generosity (we'll come to that) but justice. Our readings today don't speak directly to that, but the prophets in the OT railed against economic injustice. And the parable of the rich man perhaps does suggest it. How come he'd managed to amass so much wealth? Who worked for him, either as waged workers or possibly as wage slaves, in such a way that the wealth that was created wasn't shared out in a just manner, but accumulated to him alone?

The abundance of God's creation, the way it was meant to be, so that no one needed to worry but everyone could enjoy the good things of God's creation, must make us ask whether there are ways in which we are party to injustice, and then challenge us to change. And it must make us challenge our economic system, and business directly through campaigning, and the political system through lobbying and the direction in which we cast our votes, to try to bring about the justice that is also fundamental to God's nature and will, so that His abundance is shared and no one need worry.

So justice comes before generosity. But, of course, there is also a place for generosity in our Christian lives partly to try to make good injustices that still persist, and partly because there will always be situations where justice is not enough or doesn't apply. So St Paul in our NT reading continues from "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance" with "so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work". It's an obvious criticism of the rich man that he had more than enough of everything, but had no intention of sharing it, instead a selfishness in hoarding it for himself.

Our generosity flows out of the blessings and abundance of God. In response to His generosity to us, we are called to be generous to others. And this, of course, doesn't apply only to our financial giving which is the context in which St Paul is speaking. It applies also to our time – how generous are we in giving 'our' time to others, as though 'our' time belonged to us? And generosity applies also to our resources and abilities. How generous are we in using the things we have and the things we are able to do, in order to benefit others? Volunteering would be an obvious example where we give both our time and our

abilities to some cause, such as Durham Action on Single Housing, food banks, helping in a hospice or a hospice shop and so on.

So God's abundance leads us to challenge injustices which lead to others not sharing in that abundance. And God's abundance leads us to be generous with everything we are and have. But there is one final and important thing to add to this, and that is moderation.

The rich man may have been unjust in the accumulation of his wealth, and he was clearly not generous in sharing what he had, but what is also without doubt is that he did not live by the maxim 'moderation in all things'. Bigger barns to store his crops. Goods laid up for many years. Riches almost beyond measure. He had not learnt what we might have already learned had our Gospel reading started one verse earlier. Jesus, before telling the parable of the rich man, said, "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." There's that word abundance again, but this time turned round to confront us. We are not what we possess, life is much more than that, "life is more than food, and the body more than clothing" as Jesus says later in the Gospel reading.

It is almost beyond doubt that mankind's collective and apparently insatiable demand for more and more, for continued economic growth, is behind the ecological and biodiversity crises that we face. By contrast, as Pope Francis has put it: "Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little".¹ Moderation tells us that enough is as good as a feast.

In our approach to the natural world, moderation in some senses de-centres the human, takes 'us' out of the middle of the picture, encourages to subordinate our desires for excess with reverence for all life and the natural environment. Having too much stuff, hoarding too many things, seeking or taking more than we need – food, money, possessions, comforts – imprisons the human spirit. It can blind us to other people's needs, and lead us to neglect our human duty to take care of our common home.²

And God has just two words to say to us if we are in that position: "You fool".

Abundance, justice, generosity, moderation. An AGM message this Harvest.

Let's pray.

An adaptation of the prayer we said during confession. Oh Lord, in response to your abundance in all things, equip us to act justly, to love generously, to walk humbly with You, and to tread lightly on the earth. Amen

¹ *Laudato Si'*: 223)

² This paragraph is adapted from an article by Sister Teresa FCJ in the Church Times, 15 September 2023.