

Matthew 6:25-33
Joel 2: 21-27; 1 Timothy 6:6-10

The idea of setting aside a specific occasion, within the context of worship, to give thanks to God for the fruits of the harvest, seems to date right back to ancient Israel. The Israelite feast of Tabernacles, one of the three annual feasts listed in the Book of Deuteronomy, for which all Israelite men were required to go up to the Temple in Jerusalem, was a celebration of the gathering in of the produce of the threshing-floor and wine press. And in our Old Testament reading from the prophecy of Joel, the people are reminded that it is the Lord who provides the fruit on the trees and the rains for a plentiful harvest, and that their only response must be to “praise the name of the Lord...” The people of Israel clearly understood the importance of giving thanks to God for the abundance of their harvest.

Our modern tradition of celebrating harvest began in this country in the 1840s, but since then, of course, the increasing development of towns and cities has

meant that the significance of harvest has changed considerably. Living, as we increasingly tend to do, in more built-up areas, the gathering in of the harvest is no longer a major feature of our lives, so we tend to be less aware of the actual origins of what we see on the supermarket shelves, even though we live in the shadow of the South Downs. When I used to do harvest assemblies at an infant school in an urban setting, all of the produce that was collected for harvest was neatly tinned or packaged, so an extra effort had to be made to remind the children growing up in that context where the produce *originally* came from.

And at the same time, it’s all too easy for us to take for granted what God has given us. So, I think it’s as relevant as ever for us to set aside a Sunday each year to acknowledge that ‘all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above’.

And as our two readings from the New Testament today remind us, this harvest thanksgiving is an appropriate occasion for us to reflect upon our

attitude, as Christian believers, *towards* the material provisions with which God so graciously provides us – “.....do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear”, the Lord declares.

Today we tend to worry about all sorts of things. At work, folk are increasingly being expected to do more and more things in the same amount of time without extra pay, and this often leads to stress and anxiety. In our present economic climate, there's a widespread concern about job security and the fear of redundancy is very real. And there are constant worries about our health and that of loved ones. Such worries and concerns are, of course, very understandable – and, no doubt, we've all had recourse to worry about these kinds of things at some stage in our lives, if not at the present time. But according to the Lord Jesus, what's ridiculous is when we start to worry excessively about the *basic* necessities of life – such things as food, drink and clothing. In our country today we have *so much* choice in terms of these basic things, that we can all

too easily get caught up in undue concern about which particular designer shirt or handbag we should buy, or whether we should get a reservation at a posh restaurant in town or go for a take away round the corner. So much of the time, we worry *not* because we *don't have* enough food, drink or clothing, but because of the fact that we simply have *too much* choice. Of course, we hardly need to be reminded that there are so many in our world, and even in our own communities, who are without the basic necessities of life. This isn't because God hasn't given us an abundance of these things, but rather we simply need to share – whether it be internationally, or locally through organisations like Worthing Churches Homeless Projects and the Foodbank.

So, what, then, *is* the problem with worrying about the basic necessities of life? Well, as the Lord teaches, the problem is twofold:

First of all, worrying about these things represents a failure to trust God. One commentator has remarked that 'Worry is practical atheism and an affront to

God'. Rather, Jesus teaches us that we should have an attitude of *dependence* upon God – God will provide – his provision is sufficient for our needs. And he illustrates this by reference to birds, lilies and grass. *They* have a quiet dependence upon their environment for the provision of their basic food and clothing. So, in the same way, we as Christian believers are to demonstrate in *our* lives a similar sense of dependence, in the full knowledge that we do indeed have a loving Heavenly Father who supplies all our basic needs. It's about having faith in God's faithfulness to his creation.

And the second thing is that worrying about the basic necessities of life distracts us from what *really* matters in life. It causes us to fail to see beyond our narrow material needs. So the Lord reminds us that we need to get our priorities right – “.....strive *first* for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.....” Because when we do so, our basic material needs will follow as a matter of course. Looking constantly towards what *really* matters – looking towards things eternal – puts everything else in its proper

perspective. There is, of course, much in our society to distract us from doing so, but when we *do* focus on the Lord *above all else*, we'll be able to progress considerably in our journey of faith. And what's more, being content with what the Lord provides, when it comes to our basic needs in life, helps us to become aware of, and to have a desire to help, those in our world for whom these basic provisions can't be taken for granted.

Now in our reading from Paul's First Letter to Timothy, the apostle goes a bit further, by reminding us that contentment with what we have is a key element of living a godly life. And the reason he gives for this is simple – “.....we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.....” Our contemporary society, because it has largely lost sight of things *eternal*, tends to carry on as though life in the 'here & now' is all that matters – if death is the end, then we might as well make the best of it and amass as much wealth as we can; the pursuit of money and material possessions takes the place of God. But as committed Christians, focusing on the

living God and on things eternal should cause us to have an entirely *different* attitude towards our material possessions. Because *we* recognise what is *most* important in life – our relationship with the Living God through Jesus Christ. The danger of becoming possessed by our possessions and of placing a desire for material gain above all else, is that it pulls us away from our relationship with the Lord – as Paul says, “.....in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith.....”

Now when we talk about materialism and the desire for getting rich, we often come across a couple of common misunderstandings. Firstly, materialism isn't an actual fact, but rather an attitude of mind – it's the *love* of money that's the problem – not money itself – money in itself is a *neutral* entity. But, of course, when we *do* start to actually love our money and other material things, it certainly leads to all sorts of evils – it lies at the root of all sorts of crimes and family feuds. The desire for getting rich makes us greedy and leads to a desire for wanting

more and more – we're never quite satisfied with what we've got.

And secondly, if materialism is an attitude of mind, then it's something which we can *all* fall prey to, regardless of how wealthy or not we might consider ourselves to be. The love of money and possessions is a danger for *all* Christians, regardless of our particular financial situation. For *us*, materialism is a spiritual matter.

So, implicit in what Paul says in his Letter, is a call to live a radically different lifestyle from that of the world – one which is characterised by a quiet contentment with what God has entrusted to us, rather than being consumed with an obsessive desire for what we don't have. Perhaps each of us need to constantly examine our own lives, asking ourselves – 'Am I contented with what I have?' or 'Do I crave more and more riches in a way that distracts from my relationship with God? There's something to be said for leading a *simpler* lifestyle.

So today, as we celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving, we're presented with a few challenges. Firstly, we need to rediscover what it means to have an attitude of gratitude – to constantly give thanks to God for all that he graciously gives us. Secondly, to ask the Lord that he might grant us an attitude of dependence upon *him* for our daily needs, so that we can focus more and more on seeking *God's Kingdom* and on living that holy life which God requires of us. And thirdly, that the Holy Spirit may instil in us a *godly* attitude to our money and material possessions, so that we may not get pulled away from the faith, but that the Lord, and the Lord *alone*, may remain first in our hearts and lives.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks today for all that you graciously give us. Help us always to have an attitude of gratitude, to acknowledge our dependence upon you, and to be wise and generous stewards of all that you have entrusted to us. May we not become possessed by our possessions, but to seek your kingdom above all else. In Jesus' name. Amen.