

As we celebrate the fall harvest today, it has less immediacy for those of us who are not farmers. In days gone by, people sang the hymn *Come ye thankful people come* when the harvest had not merely been gathered in, but gathered in by their own hands. In modern, urban society, other people do the sowing, tending, and gathering of the crops, leaving us somewhat dissociated. Food appears in abundance in our supermarkets as if by magic, and the well-to-do can imagine themselves getting closer to the land by purchasing five dollar bunches of organic kale at a Saturday morning farmers' market. We have already sung the hymn *For the fruit of all creation*, with its verse about the "harvests of the Spirit." But I would like to dwell today on more tangible harvests.

The writer of Deuteronomy reminded the Israelites in no uncertain terms that although they "ploughed the fields and scattered," it was "God's almighty hand" that grew the crops to harvest. Even people with no religious faith know that in between sowing and reaping, the fate of the crop is out of their control and in the hands of 'Mother Nature.' The writer of Deuteronomy opines that those who live in the land of milk and honey should give a portion of their harvest back to God, for distribution to the Levites (the priestly caste), aliens, orphans, and widows. Everyone thus tithed according to their means so as to contribute to the organization of society (in Israel's case, a theocracy) and for the less fortunate.

The Deuteronomist's idea of giving back part of our harvest is just as relevant to we urbanites as it was to the ancient Israelites. The harvest of our hard work isn't corn, soybeans, grapes, or apples, but money. Like the Israelites, we give up part of our harvest to support both the organization of society and to assist the less fortunate. We tithe through our donations to the church and other charities (voluntarily), and to the wider Canadian society through our taxes (rather less voluntarily). Part of our harvest of money goes to support the organization of local church, diocese, charitable organization, province, or nation, as well as to helping the less fortunate in each of those communities, as we are able. I do not resent having to pay taxes, because not paying would mean that I had no income.

I get annoyed to hear politicians forever talking about "hard working taxpayers" because the word taxpayers implies the mentality of "What's in it for me?" "Am I getting enough out of the system to justify what I put in?" It is a different mentality from being "citizens" – as we consider how our contributions make our church or our country better and fairer for everyone. In his inaugural address in January 1961, President John Kennedy famously said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." He was invoking the sense of the nation as community – the same as the *ekklesia* I spoke of recently. The *ekklesia* can be any community of people who have something in common – family, church congregation, club, nation, etc. The sense of *ekklesia* breaks down when individualism becomes excessively prized in society. It leads to the argument, for example, of those in the US who oppose a Canadian-style health care system on the grounds that, "I shouldn't have to pay for other peoples' health care." The author of Deuteronomy implies that fairness means that everyone should contribute so that everyone can benefit; the individualist counters that it is not fair for me to have to pay for other people. But the come-back of the Deuteronomist would be that you did not acquire your harvest alone. You had God-given skills and abilities (and probably good luck too).

Jesus' parable from Matthew's Gospel is also a comment on the question of fairness in society. A landowner went to the marketplace where casual labourers were waiting to be hired. He hired some at a

set daily wage. During the day, he found that he needed more workers, so he went back to the marketplace and hired more. At the end of the day, everyone was paid the same amount, the daily wage. Those who worked the whole day were angry and jealous when the boss paid them the same as those who worked only a part-shift. They grumbled, "We worked longer so we should be paid more."

Perhaps we sympathize because we naturally think of workers being paid by the hour rather than by the day. We ask what was fair – to pay strictly for hours worked, or to recognize that it was only chance as to which workers got hired first? They had all showed up early looking for work. That was how dock workers and construction workers were hired in Canada in days gone by. On a given day, some got picked and some didn't, but they all had families to feed. In the parable, the landowner told the complainers, "It's my money; I can spend it how I please. You all agreed to work for the daily wage, so why are you griping?" The usual interpretation of the parable is that the Kingdom of Heaven, whether we think of it as in this world or the next, plays by different rules than the usual ones in society.

As an other example, those of us who have been life-long Anglicans and attended church regularly might think that we have more 'right' to live with God in the afterlife than the no-good so-and-so down the street who had a conversion late in life? Surely that's fair? Like the labourers in the vineyard, I could say that I worked longer for my reward. But the Gospel tells us that it is in God's gift to choose. Eternal life with God is not a long service award. Or how might I feel if a new member of the parish got elected warden only a few months after coming to St. George's? The fact is that every time we welcome a new person into our parish family, they are at once a full member of the parish. They are not associate members who must serve an apprenticeship before they or their ideas can be fully accepted. Today's Gospel challenges us because it tells us that the values of the Kingdom of Heaven concerning fairness run counter to a lot of the usual values of the outside world.

One of the chief innovations of the 1982 version of our Canadian Constitution is our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. An unanticipated byproduct is the emphasis on 'rights' that has developed, as we see by reading about the kinds of cases that are heard by our Supreme Court. People today talk about many issues as "fundamental human rights," such as clean water, education, health care and so on. The American philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that human rights do not exist independent of political rights, for if the political will to enforce those rights is missing, they become meaningless. In Canada, we regard religious freedom, freedom to worship as we please, as a fundamental human right. But you have no right to worship as a Christian in Saudi Arabia. So is freedom to be Christian a fundamental human right, if it is not actually available? Equally, we could ask what it might have meant to speak of equal rights between men and women one hundred years ago, when women could not vote and married women could not own property in their own names. At that time, these were dreams of equality that did not yet exist. They exist today in Canada because, in Hannah Arendt's words, there is the political will to enforce them. It is a sobering thought to realize that they could be lost if the political will no longer existed. Rights in any *ekklesia* can easily be lost if we do not actively support them.

Like the writer of Deuteronomy, Jesus had a clear sense about fairness and our interdependence on each other. The labourers in the vineyard were paid the same out of a sense of fairness that ran counter to the principle of individualism. Our harvests, whether of agricultural produce or of money, are not exclusively ours. As we bring the kingdom of heaven, the one Jesus talked about, to reality in Canada, we realize that we are obliged to contribute to the many *ekkllesias* or communities of which we are part.