

FRANCISCAN HARVEST

VEGETABLES AND BIRDSONG

If like me you're an avid fan of *Gardener's Question Time*, you'll know that the panel of horticultural experts have been inundated this year with questions about growing fruit and veg by people who had never grown an apple or a tomato in their life!

As you can see from the blue squash grown at the Vicarage by my own fair hands – I've been listening to their advice very carefully!

One reason for this flood of questions was that during lockdown many people turned to growing their own food – and not just because the supermarket shelves were often empty.

There was something therapeutic about sowing, and tending and growing plants at a time when normal life had stopped.

And when all our usual patterns of work and productivity had ceased – here was a way of doing something literally fruitful with the time.

This year, our Harvest Festival takes on a particular significance.

Very few of us can remember a time when the shelves were empty.

Very few of us in this country have ever known the genuine fear that we might not have enough to eat – and although before and during lockdown there was always enough food, it was panic-bought and hoarded so fast that many people couldn't get what they needed when they needed it.

So also the Parable of the Rich Man also takes on a new significance this year.

He stocks up all his goods just like some people filled cupboards with enough toilet-roll and pasta for a year.

I was reminded of the safety introductions you hear when you get on a plane:

'Secure your own breathing mask before helping others with theirs'

Good advice when you're on a plane,

but a terrible ethic to live by –

making sure you're all right before you help anyone else.

By contrast, Christian ethics is exactly the opposite,

we help others first and only then ourselves.

But there was another unexpected aspect of lockdown – for the first time in years people said they heard the birds singing again. Without the planes and trains and cars and people everywhere, we were able to listen to sounds we had almost forgotten were there. It was an unexpected joy at a terrible time, a reminder of the many natural wonders that are drowned out by our noisy and over-busy lives.

RAVENS AND LILIES

Christ also draws attention to plants and birds in today's Gospel:

'Consider' he says.

Consider the ravens.

Consider the lilies.

He uses the feeding of one and the beauty of the other as illustrations of God's care for us.

A reminder of the all-to-easily-forgotten-and-fundamental-truth that
WE ARE LOVED.

Too often, Harvest can seem like a romantic anachronism for an imagined rural idyll, but it re-presents to us one of the basic tents of the Faith:

That God LOVES you.

That God CARES for you.

That God SUSTAINS you.

Like the sound of birdsong in a busy world, these basic truths can easily be drowned out by all the noise.

So Christ says to us 'look'

Just LOOK around you.

Can you not see what is right in front of you?

All these plants and creatures?

Such abundance and beauty?

Can you not see what it means?

And it's in that context that he tells us not to worry.

God knows there are things to worry about,

not just whether there's enough pasta or toilet-roll to go round,

but more important things like whether many of us will have a job in a few months' time,

and how our children are being affected by it all.

These things are real and worth worrying about,

but the Christian places them in a different context;

we respond to events not from a place of fear,

but from the security of the knowledge of God's loving care for us

SAINT FRANCIS

Now it just so happens that Harvest this year falls on the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi. In his life of radical poverty Francis understood what it meant to rely on the love of God for all his needs.

With today's Gospel in mind it's no accident that the most famous collection of stories about his life is known as 'Il Fioretti' - *The Little Flowers* - and the most famous story within that collection is his preaching to the birds, which goes like this:

'Francis came to a spot where a large flock of birds of various kinds had come together. When God's saint saw them, he quickly ran to the spot and greeted them as if they were endowed with reason.

He went right up to them and solicitously urged them to listen to the word of God, saying,

'Oh birds, my brothers and sisters, you have a great obligation to praise your Creator, who clothed you in feathers and gave you wings to fly with, provided you with pure air and cares for you without any worry on your part.'...

The birds showed their joy in a remarkable fashion: They began to stretch their necks, extend their wings, open their beaks and gaze at him attentively.

He went through their midst with amazing fervour of spirit, brushing against them with his tunic. Yet none of them moved from the spot until the man of God made the sign of the cross and gave them permission to leave; then they all flew away together. His companions waiting on the road saw all these things. When he returned to them, that pure and simple man began to accuse himself of negligence because he had not preached to the birds before.'

This isn't just some twee story about Francis' love for animals.

As Francis reminds the birds of the wonder of their feathers and flight and air he offers an critique of human beings who fail to praise God for his many gifts to us.

Though the birds are without reason

they are far better at listening than most people

– which he is sorry he hasn't preached to them before!

Yesterday, another Francis – Pope Francis – was in Assisi and in the words of a new encyclical ‘Fratellit Tutti’ – which means *Brothers and Sisters all* – he invites us to be inspired by the example of Saint Francis who called all creatures his brothers and sisters.

The text is only released today and so I haven’t read it yet, but it calls us to new solidarity with one another to seek healing for the world in a post-pandemic world. I encourage you all to read it.

[The text is now published and can be found here:

http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html]

FRANCISCAN HARVEST

Francis the saint died at the age of 44,
lying on the ground where he had been set down under a grove of trees.
It is said that at the moment of his death a multitude of larks rose up singing.
At the end of a life considering the flowers and the birds,
he owned nothing,
so he had nothing to lose
nothing to fear
and nothing to worry about.
Everything in all creation was his brother and sister – even death itself.
So my brothers and sisters,
on this Harvest Festival,
as we share what we have,
may it be a sign that our eyes always be open
to the birds of the air and the flowers of the field
as a constant reminder
That God loves us.
God cares for us.
God sustains us.

Amen.