

Luke 12: 16 – 21

At this time of year, as the days begin to shorten, it is a very natural time to look back on what we have received in the season of growth and how (despite the current dire warnings in the press of shortages in fuel, transport, supplies – and even sadly, our own personal experiences at least of a selfishly engineered fuel shortage) we are really unlikely to suffer from lack of food or other supplies that will take us through the winter. Perhaps sometimes we need to consider more carefully the need to give thanks for all that we have and the ways in which we might do it...

Here's a little story of thanksgiving slightly going astray:

A grandmother lived in a small cottage by the sea and from time to time her young grandson would come to visit her and she would take him along the seashore explaining how the food they ate was harvested from land and sea and that they were fortunate enough to be able to give thanks to God every day for the wonderful gifts he gave them, both in the food they ate and in the beautiful environment around them from which this food was drawn ... "never forget" she said to him, " to give thanks to God for everything he has given you." One day they were down on the beach collecting shellfish when a big wave came and carried the little boy away. The granny fell to her knees in prayer. "Lord God you give us everything and we thank you for it, now please give back the child from the sea." Whoosh! Another wave came and deposited a damp child at her feet. ... the granny grabbed him in her arms and then she looked him over carefully.... "Granny shouldn't we give thanks to God for saving me?" "Well... not yet," she said and looking up into the heavens she said sternly " he was wearing a hat when he fell in!"

In fact in the U.K. it is only really a sense of panic engendered by the greed of some that makes us fear those shortages. It seems as if, although we have come through a large part of the pandemic of the last 18 months, we have not remained as a society particularly attuned to continue either sharing, or giving thanks for the wonderful things we have received. There are of course always those who will share. There will be many of you who have good neighbours who have cared for you, and I'm sure many of you who have been good neighbours yourselves.

When we consider today's readings, perhaps because we live in a market town, or one of its surrounding villages we have knowledge and understanding of relatively rural areas. We know the gift of creation seen in the beauty of the environment and we also know that what grows from this environment is God-given and something which we need to share. We probably also understand that there is no need to over-produce from this land, to wear it out and to misuse it. And we know that the bounty we are given is something we are duty bound to share. If we look at the man in this evening's Gospel reading, we see that he overproduces to the extent that he believes that the only solution to this over-supply is to build bigger barns. (Anyone remember the 'intervention stores on Prees Heath in the late 1980's / early 1990's). And what does Jesus tell us that God says to the man? ..."you fool" strong words really..... What an opportunity this man has lost to understand the goodness and loving nature of God and to pass that understanding to others around him. Instead of worrying about his stores, his profits, his life, he could have been open handed and open hearted and lived whatever life he had to its true fulfilment as a child of God.

In this country and in all of the N. Hemisphere we have more than enough to keep us going and perhaps we need to use this time of thanksgiving to remind ourselves of how blessed we are and of how much we may gain in life itself, if we simply trust in God to give us what we need, which is undoubtedly much less than we demand. People throughout the world have always given thanks to God (or some form of God) for the produce from the land which allows them to survive. There has always been a time of year e.g. in the autumn when thanks were given to God for his bounty. Although the current form of harvest festivals is probably Victorian, the bringing of both first and last produce to the church as an offering of thanks dates back hundreds of years. However, giving thanks to God for what we receive should be both a daily and an annual event.

Not only should we give thanks to God for our food, but also for the people who produce it and process it and distribute it – and there is another sharp reminder of how forgetful we can be as we see suppliers struggling to distribute our food. All the same, there is no real danger to our lives from lack of food, we don't need to store it all up in big barns or warehouses. We could in fact use the current difficulties to support a system of more locally produced and more locally delivered goods, which seemed to be a feature at the height of the pandemic.... I'm not about to launch into a lecture on global economics, but this a good time of year for everyone to think a little more about what we buy, where it comes from and how we can be determined to ensure fair trade takes place for all nations and all people..... that means some of us paying more, some paying less, but also developing some sense of truly sharing what we have.

Whilst it is easy to say that there should be no food banks in this country, as you know only too well in this community, that does not deny the present need for them, not does it mean that we have no duty to give generously to those Foodbanks or to any of the organisations that support fair trade, smaller farmers, and those in food poverty in all parts of the world. The matrix of food production is a very complicated one, much of it beyond our influence, but perhaps if at this time of year we really take the time and trouble to give thanks to God, we can also use it as a time of prayer and reflection.

How lucky we are to be able to sit here tonight in this beautifully decorated church, in the serenity of this place, but we are not really untouched by the world. The fields and farms of this area, the houses and streets of this town, and even this church building reflect past economies that shaped and controlled farming practices. Once this was a region of wool production, and of cereals (rye and oats especially), then in Victorian times a vast dairy industry set up in Shropshire and Cheshire to supply the rapidly growing cities.... During both World Wars the demand for eggs and vegetables and pigs grew.... Perhaps soon Veganism will dictate our crop patterns and our food distribution.... and always our farmers have to keep an eye on the global markets which can often undercut them and put them out of their family farms.

Large production and processing companies have increasingly dictated what is grown where and when. They have driven the trend for farms to become huge and to lose to some extent the intimate knowledge of the land and its ecosystems that have been the gift of the family farmer throughout the world.

Let me tell you one more story:

A Texan Farmer goes to Australia and is given a tour of a farming region by an Aussie Farmer. The Aussie shows off his big wheat field... "oh" says the Texan "we have fields twice as big as that." They drive round the ranch a bit more to look at the cattle ... "oh" says the Texan "we've got longhorns at least twice as large as those cows." The Aussie is feeling a bit deflated and they travel on in silence Suddenly a group of kangaroos hops through a field ... "What are those?" asks the Texan..... the Aussie looks incredulous "Oh" he says, "don't you have any grasshoppers in Texas?"

Well it's a story isn't it, but I think / I hope that when 2 farmers meet they'll talk more of similarities than differences.... Sharing ideas and stories, but in the end understanding that for anyone, producing from the land, or processing or selling the food we have, it is very hard work and often very worrying. We are blessed by the food we receive, by the beauty of our environment and for us as Christians, by our understanding that the natural world around us is a gift of God the creator of heaven and earth,

When Jesus says: 'don't worry' (**Matthew 6: 28 – 34**) he reminds us of the beauty of the world, of the food provided for us, of the bounteous grace in this provision and of the fact that there is plenty to share. Our concern, he reminds us, is that we should be right with God ... become more humble, more loving, more generous and more grateful. Righteousness perhaps begins with giving thanks to God in the harvest festival.