

Sermon for Harvest, Kinross, 28 September 2025

Does anyone know who this painting is by? Does anyone know what it is called? “***The Red Vineyards***” near Arles is an oil painting from 1888. It is by the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh and depicts workers in a vineyard. This painting is an exuberant celebration of the harvest season when the vineyards burst out in a riot of rich and fiery colours. Van Gogh's lifelong fascination with colour and his insatiable desire to convey emotions through his art are evident here. Any idea about what is special about it? It is the only painting by Van Gogh that sold during his lifetime. It seems that his works were not widely appreciated until after his death. Now, however, the painting is regarded as a masterpiece, and it will probably conjure up memories for anyone who has lived or worked anywhere around the Mediterranean. The parables of Jesus are like great paintings. He was painting a ‘picture with words.’ The stories told by Jesus might be described as masterpieces but it doesn't really matter whether experts call them. What is important is the effect it has on us. Do we like it, or not? Does it make us feel uncomfortable? What do you make of it?

We have just sung the old harvest song, “*We plough the fields and scatter.*” This hymn is really about God and God's extravagant generosity. That is also one of the messages in the parable of the Sower (Luke 8) and in the shorter, less well-known parable of the Growing Seed (Mark 4). God is the Sower, scattering seed liberally, even wastefully, everywhere. God sows. It's what God does. It's what God keeps on doing. God keeps throwing seeds, regardless of where the seed might land. God is love, and love is generous, lavish, abundant, eager to share what is good. God will not withhold the Word from anyone. God will not deny anyone access to the Good News. Living besides working farms, I watch with amazement at tractors ploughing straight furrows but I'm told that it is all technology. God doesn't use a computer-driven tractor to plot out perfectly spaced rows, carefully inserting each seed at the exact depth of carefully prepared soil for optimum germination. God scatters the Good News of the Kingdom of God liberally, even in places where it is not likely to grow or bear fruit. God sows everywhere. Whether on the path, on rocky soil, among thorns, or in the good dirt, the Good News cannot be contained. God does not discriminate between good soil and bad soil. God throws the seed of the Kingdom everywhere! It goes out into all the world, to transform any and all who will accept it. Jesus challenges us to believe in God's abundance.

Jesus gave us another painting in the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matthew 13) which compares our lives to the growth of wheat. But let me talk about potatoes than wheat where the story is slightly different – you plant the seed potato and then wait. When shoots come up, you know something is happening. The plants grow and you know they are alive – but

you don't know what is going on under the ground. When they start to die away, you don't know what is happening below the surface. You still have to wait – until the day comes when you put on your wellies and take out the fork. Very carefully you start the lifting of the potatoes. The excitement comes in finding out in what is underneath. Maybe the plants didn't look too good but there are loads of potatoes. Maybe the plants looked great but the yield is very small. Only we ourselves and God know what goes on inside us. It's possible to look holy on the outside when our lives are not fruitful. Maybe our lives look a bit ordinary but in our own quiet ways, we are being fruitful in God's kingdom. Only the time of the harvest will tell. Later in the service, when symbolic offerings of the harvest are brought up in thanksgiving, make it into an opportunity to offer yourselves to God. Think of the head of wheat or the hidden potato. Ask the Lord to enable your life to become an abundant human harvest. Some of us have come to expect scarcity instead of abundance. Experience has taught us to expect that there is not enough – there's not enough love, not enough joy, not enough grace. We've come to expect we're always going to get the short end of the stick and we'll always come out behind instead of ahead of the game. We've come to expect that you have to 'settle for less' and 'scrape by the best we can'. What if God is not mean but is a God of extravagance?

The parable of the rich fool (Luke 12) was the third parable that we heard. Jesus paints a picture of a wealthy farmer who, after a bountiful harvest, decides to build bigger barns to store his surplus grain and enjoy a life of leisure. God, however, calls him a fool because his life is demanded that very night, leaving his accumulated wealth for others to inherit. He planned to enjoy a life of comfort and luxury but, that very night, God tells him that he will die, rendering his wealth and plans meaningless. No-one wants to be a fool – but Jesus calls him a 'fool' because he does not see reality for what it is. A fool overlooks the ordinary circumstances of life.

No one has control over the millions of circumstances that can affect their life. The most powerful person on earth can be laid low by a tiny blood clot travelling to the heart. The wealthiest person in the world can stumble, fall, hit his head. An accident or an unforeseen disease can strike anyone at any time. Jesus calls him a 'fool' for not being 'rich toward God'.

Do you remember Van Gogh's painting "*The Red Vineyards*"? In Scotland, unlike some areas of the world, we live through four different seasons. Perhaps you'd like it to be summer all the time? Genesis 8:22 puts it well: "***While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.***" We are about to sing these words in Thomas Chisholm's great hymn "*Great is the faithfulness*". The seasons are God's gift that provide variation and replenish our planet, continually renewing it. God created the world which Jesus gave us the

responsibility to take care of. We must manage it the very best we can and resist the temptation to being tied to possessions and accumulating more.

Think about what makes a good *harvest*. Try to list the many things which we *have* from God for which we are grateful, including food and clean water; farmers to cultivate land; insects to pollinate plants, rain to help them grow and sun to ripen them. But many people are *starving*. Remember all who do not have sufficient food to eat and the birds who starve through a lack of insects due to damaged ecosystems. We need to *share* God's earth with other people and with other creatures.

Every year we celebrate harvest but the planet is in crisis and soon the harvest may not be there anymore. Climate change is a large-scale and long-term shift in the world's weather. Ten years ago, 195 nations signed up to an agreement to limit the rise in temperature to no more than 2 degrees. Six years later in Glasgow just under 200 nations signed a pact to limit the temperature rise to 1.5 degrees. Climate change is a major injustice of our time because the people least responsible for it are regularly the biggest victims to the most devastating effects of climate change. We, who are the first generation to foresee it, may be the final generation with an opportunity to forestall it. We need to hold things lightly and keep in mind who really owns them. For our hope and peace of mind ultimately lies in our reliance on God. In the end it comes down to saying, "*Dear Lord, I am yours, and I am thankful that you are mine.*"