

SERMON – 26/9/21**'Harvest Thanksgiving'**

Psalm 104:10-24

“[Lord,] from the sky you send rain on the hills and the earth is filled with your blessings.” (Psalm 104:13)

Over these last few weeks of our Stewardship Season we have been reflecting on different aspects of the call we have as Christians to be good stewards of Creation. We began by reminding ourselves of the most important fact of all, that this is *God's* creation and that it is not *ours* to do with as we please. That is a vital perspective for Christians to grasp. We have celebrated the fact that God has made all things well and that creation is very good, and we have mourned the fact that because of human sin there is a tragic brokenness that affects the whole created order. We looked at what the Law of Moses had to say to the people of Israel about how to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly as the people of God in a broken world and we considered some of the lessons that there are for us as God's people today. And last Sunday, Rob Pettifer held out for us the promise of God to make all things new at the end of time and gave us the challenge to take action here and now in ways that fulfil God's ultimate purpose for the world.

This morning as we make our harvest thanksgiving our reading from Psalm 104 celebrates the astonishing fruitfulness that comes from something that we are more likely to complain about than to celebrate – rain. Of course these words were written in the Middle East, albeit in the land promised to be flowing with milk and honey, but for us who live in a green and pleasant land they give us cause to stop and remember those for whom the management of water is a daily struggle whether because of changing weather patterns the search for any water at all (never mind clean water) is becoming desperate or because in places like the Maldives or Bangladesh water threatens to overwhelm them.

Let me introduce you to Orbisa. She's 35 and lives in north-eastern Ethiopia with her children. It is one of the hottest places on earth. She and her family work hard rearing goats and cattle to make a living, but in the past few years nine of her ten cows and nearly half of her goats have all perished because the rains aren't coming when they used to, and droughts

in the region are getting more severe. As the climate changes, it's pushing Orbisa's family deeper into poverty. When the rains come she only has a five minute walk to find enough water for her family and her flock to drink, as well as for cleaning and for nurturing crops but when the dry season comes the streams dry up and the walk for water takes many hours every day. Yet by contrast, to years ago severe flooding in nearby South Sudan drove half a million people from their homes. Climate change is affecting all of us but while for people like us severe weather is an occasional inconvenience for the world's poorest people it is a matter of life and death. Tearfund is working with the church where Orbisa lives to set up solar-powered wells that will provide clean water closer to communities thereby restoring hope and giving new life for all who live there. But that is only part of the answer. If we are not simply to despair over emergency after emergency when droughts and floods strike we need to look at the deeper issues that are disproportionately affecting the world's poorest and most vulnerable.

Today as we celebrate the very real and physical fruits of the Harvest which sustain our lives I want to encourage us all to think very practically about actions we can each take to be better stewards of creation in our daily lives so that we may play our part in the fulfilment of God's purposes where we can each make a difference.

As we read in the Psalm, God "makes springs to flow in valleys and rivers to run between the hills" (v.10) – God's creation is a good one but we have all played our part in spoiling it and not just in ways that we can see around us, when litter takes away its beauty or when oil-spills disrupt its balance on our shores in ways that are far more serious and long-lasting than any disruption to our precious supply chains.

"From the sky you send rain on the hills, the psalmist writes, and the earth is filled with your blessings." (v.13) As a result the grass grows for the cattle and plants for us to eat, and we celebrate that will all our hearts today as we should do every time we sit down to eat. But the fact is that in some places the rain has stopped falling on the hills, the rivers have stopped running and the springs have dried up while in others the rain has never stopped falling and the rivers have taken whole communities away with them and what was given as a blessing has become a curse. The psalmist speaks about the orderliness of creation, of the moon marking the months

and the sun knowing when to set, but what we are seeing in our world is a wholesale shaking of that order, a wake-up call that we must heed where the people of Noah's generation did not.

It's no accident that in the psalm reference is made to water bringing forth three particular fruits of the earth. The psalmist writes of plants that “produce *wine* to make people happy, olive *oil* to make them cheerful and *bread* to give them strength” and the significance of these things should not be lost on us. Bread and wine point us powerfully to Jesus whose body was broken for us and whose blood was shed for us on the Cross, and water for baptism and oil for anointing call us urgently to seek the Holy Spirit's transforming touch upon our lives. God is at work here, the Creator, the Redeemer and the Transformer, and all these things are connected. There must be no separation of the physical and the spiritual – the fruit of the earth laid before us here this morning and on our tables day by day goes hand in hand with the fruit of the Spirit which God brings forth from all who will open themselves to His coming. Just as we cannot receive our daily bread without acknowledging our Maker, so we cannot celebrate the eternal salvation God has wrought for us in Christ and do nothing in the world around us.

As the COP26 conference draws closer we are perhaps apt to think that its agenda only matters to the delegates who will be gathering from around the world or that it is only governments and people in positions of power who can make a difference in regard to the climate crisis or indeed to the suffering of the world's poor. What I want to ask you to take on board today is that we each have a role to play as a direct consequence of our commitment to follow Jesus Christ day by day and as a significant part of our mission as a Church in our community.

While we must certainly play our part by honouring God in the way we treat our own local environment, we cannot celebrate a plentiful harvest here without having a concern for our global neighbours who are hit first and worst by the climate emergency, and that must involve us in speaking up for those whose voice is not heard, particularly in a year when the world is coming to our doorstep. Our first response should be to fix our eyes on God and to pray. But we can't stop there. In the face of a crisis like this, we need to be brave and use our voice. We each must make our own decisions about what we do in response to God's Word to us in Christ – in the

remainder of the service we have some specific suggestions to offer and I begin by inviting you to watch a short video which encourages us to recognise our own part in the brokenness of the world but also to acknowledge the part we each have to play in God's purpose or renewal and hope in our world. www.vimeo.com/451780056/841556a0a7