

Celebrating the Harvest

(Deuteronomy 26:1-11, 24:19 – Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on March 13th, 2022)

If you have ever been to Bruna's house you would be well aware of the great harvest of fruit and vegetables she has. At this time of the year there are zucchinis, tomatoes, chilli, figs, herbs of all kinds, lemons. And she shares them with everyone, if she isn't giving you some of her produce, she is cooking it up and giving her baking away. She takes great pleasure in this and recently around the corner there is a market where you go and swap your produce, of course she is taking her zucchini and tomatoes.

My harvest is not so productive this year, but I have rhubarb, coriander and tomatoes at the moment. As a child I remember the harvest in the country on my grand-parents farm. They were dairy farmers and the harvest was all about cutting the hay and bundling it up and storing it so the cows would have food for the rest of the year. You only had a short window in which to do it, and everyone helped everyone get the hay in, you went from one property to another to get it done.

Since Covid many of us have thought more about being self-sufficiency and growing our own food, so we might be harvesting some of it right now in Autumn.

The word 'harvest' comes from the old Anglo-Saxon word for Autumn. In many churches the idea of a harvest festival has existed for centuries, farmers would meet to give thanks for the successful harvest in Autumn. It is a time to give thanks to God for the gift of food, food that matures or ripens in Autumn and then nourishes all year round. Early on it was called 'Lammas' which means 'loaf mass', at this time people would bring to church bread made from grain from their harvest of wheat.

Of course, all of this has its origin in the Bible. We have some of those readings today. The people of God were to bring the first fruits of their harvest as an offering of thanks to God, to thank God for that which was provided to grow the food. It was an acknowledgement that through God's provision they were brought out of a land where they were oppressed to a land of plenty, where they had food to share. However, there was injunction as well. The readings from Deuteronomy today speak of sharing the harvest with both the priests and 'aliens' (strangers) in their midst. Earlier in the book the people are told when they harvest and leave some behind, don't go back and get it, leave it for the orphan, the widow and the stranger – leave it for the poor. Do you recall how Ruth the great-great-great grandmother of Jesus who was both a widow and foreigner would gather the wheat left over in the field of Boaz who directed his staff to leave enough in the field for the poor. Similar themes are in the book of Exodus (23:16 & 34:21-22), celebrate the harvest and offer to God with thanksgiving the first fruits of that harvest and then in Leviticus (19:9 & 23:22) the requirement to leave some of the harvest for the poor.

Harvest festival then has strong roots in our religious tradition. It both celebrates God's provision and reminds us to care for the less fortunate, there is really no need for people to go hungry in our world, if only we would practice this. A practical expression of love, the kind of love Jesus expresses in our reading from Luke. The kind of love Jesus has for the people and we also should have, is like a hen for her chicks. A hen provides for her chicks, protects her chicks as she shelters them under her wings.

In the harvest we see promise. A pip becomes an apple. Grain becomes bread. A seed brings forth a great harvest. We also see God's desire for us to care for others, to share, to help out the less fortunate – the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the poor.

Are we like Boaz? Are we like Jesus?

Whilst some of us don't have a harvest to give back to God and share with others, we do have our dollars.

Do we give back to God, do we offer our first fruits back to God as an act of thanksgiving for his provision, do we offer to God part of our harvest for the furthering of God's work both here and in the world? Do we share what we have with others, with the poor in our community and the world? That is the challenge posed for us today. That is why in part I have suggested we bring items to share with Asylum Seekers at Sanctuary and Houses of Hope today.

So today, let us reflect on God's creative provision for us and also our responsibilities. Let me quote to you the words of a North American Indian – 'Only when the last tree has died and the last river has been poisoned and the last fish has been caught will we realise that we cannot eat money.'

As you leave our service today, I invite you to take an envelope, contained within it are a few seeds and some instructions. They are sweet peas and can be planted in the garden or in pots, traditionally we plant sweet peas on St. Patrick's Day which is March 17th, next Thursday. Take those seeds as a reminder of all God's gifts to us, as a way of reconnecting with the earth, as a reminder that within those seeds is contained a harvest. Come Spring share your bounty with others. And give thanks. Amen.