

Live within thy harvest

Just outside the entrance to my kitchen is a wall hanging I made many years ago, at its centre is a cross stitched pumpkin with the words, 'live within thy harvest' stitched above. Putting it at the entrance to where all my food preparation takes place is a constant prompt to me not only to try to ensure I don't waste food but taken in its broader context it is a reminder that any harvest is not for me alone but rather is there to be shared. All of us would have seen the directions for use on products ranging from medicinal cream to household sprays which cautions us to use such products sparingly. To live within our harvest, I suggest, calls for us to buy far less and use sparingly while sharing what we have generously.

Currently our market driven consumerist society sees the minority who live in the wealthier countries including New Zealand over consuming and accumulating at the detrimental expense of the majority of our neighbours and our planet. Yet as today's gospel reading from John reminds us we are all interconnected and our strength rests in growing a God given economy which is deeply rooted in love and care for one another, producing as its fruit the treasures of humanity and our earthly home, as opposed to the fleeting pleasures of short-lived monetary driven products.

Maxey Jarman was an internationally known Christian businessman. During his heyday, he gave away millions. He built churches around the world and gave generously to all kinds of Christian causes. Then he experienced financial reverses. He lost his company and most of his personal fortune. During the darkest days of his financial crunch, a friend

asked if he regretted the millions he had given away over the years. Jarman answered, "Not at all. I only lost what I kept for myself."

In God's economy, what we keep, we lose; what we give to God is ours forever.¹

The late Bishop Edwin Hughes once delivered a rousing sermon on "God's Ownership" that annoyed a wealthy parishioner, after the service was over the man took the Bishop to his house for lunch, and then walked him through his elaborate gardens, woodlands, and farm and pointed out all the acreage he owned and all the things that he had. When the tour was completed, turning to the Bishop he said, "Now are you going to tell me," he demanded "that all this land does not belong to me?" Bishop Hughes smiled and suggested, "Ask me that same question a hundred years from now."

Today's Gospel reading is a familiar one. Taken from the Gospel of John it is another extended metaphor which borrows from and adapts Old Testament imagery for Israel. The imagery of the vine, closely associated with the term vineyard was frequently used throughout the Mediterranean world. Significantly for this reading today is the frequent use of such a metaphor in the Old Testament and in Judaism to symbolise Israel. Isaiah for example used this image in his Song of the Vineyard.

Furthermore even the notion of the true vine is to be found in Jeremiah² here it says "I planted you as a fruitful vine, entirely true. "

¹ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2003-09-28-Everything-Comes-from-You-The-Forgotten-Secret-of-Christian-Giving/>

² <http://biblehub.com/jeremiah/2-21.htm>

Additionally found in both Jeremiah and Isaiah as well as today's passage is the theme of judgement which accompanies nearly every use of this imagery in the Old Testament; The image of God as the gardener pruning fruitless vines.

Moving to today's passage it would appear that when Jesus refers to himself as the true vine he is again taking an image used for Israel and relating it to him essentially signalling the beginning of a new chapter where the identification of the people of God with a specific nation would cease and led by Jesus the new people of God would embrace all people Jews and non Jews alike and would move out beyond geographical boundaries to embrace the whole world.

However we are left in no doubt this new community rooted in God would be held accountable and would be expected to bear fruit for God the ultimate gardener. What sort of fruit referred to has been widely debated by scholars with some suggesting it centres on winning people for Christ through evangelism whilst others interpret the fruit as being the ethical virtues characteristic of Christian life.

Yet, as I mentioned earlier for me the message is far more simple and yet profound and it underpins all forms of missionary work as well as the ethical values promoted by how we live our lives. Taking the beginning of the reading Jesus opens with the words "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing".

This surely is what it means to be a Christian, to be in an authentic relationship with Christ and each other, leaning together in a community of generous love and respect.; Where each of our particular vineyards are joined to our neighbours without any walls or fences to divide us.

Such interconnection is what the Rev. Martin Luther King referred to as, “an inescapable network of mutuality, tied together in a single garment of destiny; injustice to one is an injustice to all.”

Then moving to Jesus’ closing command is the everlasting tie which interweaves and strengthens all human relationships when he directs us to “Love each other as I have loved you”.

Our Gospel reading coupled with our celebration of harvest serves as a timely reminder that we are created as relational beings in the image of God. Any form of neglect or indifference towards our neighbours and our environment has the potential to cause immense damage to the vine we are all attached to.

The African concept of *Ubuntu* holds that ‘I am who I am through my relationships and interdependence with other people.’ If such relationships are destroyed so is a person’s concept of identity and self, rendering a person as invisible. Such invisibility weakens not only the person/community immediately affected but to humanity as a whole.

The biblical focus is on community and we are called to think in terms of we rather than I. A great example of what it means to be in community is found within the Lakota Indian tribe. Their culture is primarily relational, not individual. A culture in which there are no outcasts and no one is left out. This sense of oneness in community is also extended to the winged, finned and four legged variety.

A delightful story is told of a Lakota woman called Zona, who, when asked to share her story, by some well-meaning non-Indian Christians, responded by speaking about her community of friends and relations. Impatiently one of the listeners said, “but Zona when are you going to tell us about you?”

quietly Zona responded, “You have not listened, I have been telling you about myself.”

I would like us to pause and reflect on what may be our individual and collective thoughts, and subsequent response, to the notion of such interconnectedness between all people and our earthly home brought to us through the powerful imagery of Christ as the vine and all of us as the branches. How can we effectively give our all to strengthen and grow God’s global vineyard so that everyone may share and enjoy within the daily harvest?

Already we have much to celebrate with our practical caring, our ongoing support of the Lower Hutt foodbank as seen here again today with our harvest food collection, and our readiness to provide goods and to support the Red Cross in their resettlement of refugee families coming into Wellington. Yet vital though such giving is and I am sure we all committed to maintain it, in itself this will not change what causes such hunger neither will it address the increasing displacement of so many people.

There is a phrase used in business that could serve, if we are willing, to challenge and extend us in our respective ministries as well as the Anglican Church as a whole, the phrase refers to the ‘low hanging fruit’. It is a reference to the fruit lowest on the tree easily reached without too much exertion affording readily acquired results. In business terms it is taken to mean focussing on work that will reap rich rewards with minimal effort and expense as opposed to targeting higher up the tree to work that would require hard effort with less financial gain yet may be far more worthwhile to tackle in the longer term.

As I begin to conclude Dom Hélder Câmara is a powerful example of a Christian who was prepared to take enormous risks to reach for the fruit at

the top of the tree. A Brazilian Roman Catholic Archbishop Camara guided the Catholic Church in Brazil to challenge the injustices of the day and become an outspoken critic of the 1964-85 military dictatorship and a powerful movement for social change. He once said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

Asking and addressing the why questions means stretching to the hard to reach fruit higher up the tree yet if the church is to be real and relevant in today's troubled world then such longer term engagement with the tough tasks is vital and such ministry belongs to the whole Church and not left to just a handful of willing parishioners.

As I finish I invite you to remember,

What we can't do alone, we can do together,

We need to always be thinking globally while acting locally

We hear and are likely to forget,

We see and we remember,

we do and we understand.

Amen.

Chris Frazer

March 13, 2016.