

Harvest Festival Sermon

27 February 2022

8am and 10am Service St James'

Preached by Rev'd Murray Wills

May the words on my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you Lord, our rock and redeemer Amen

"Blessed are you God of all creation. It's through your goodness that we have these gifts to share" – We say that, or a form like it at every service we have.

Today at all of our services at St James' and All Saints' we celebrate Harvest Festival.

Harvest is from the Anglo-Saxon word hærfest, "Autumn". It then came to refer to the season for reaping and gathering grain and other grown products.

For me, and I'm sure many of us, it will bring back memories of our youth, where this celebration was an annual event on the Church calendar.

For the first 11 years of my life, before I came to St James' in 1971 I was brought up in the country outside Mosgiel. I went to a small country school that went through to form 2 and

had a total of 90 students. Those days were spent outside climbing trees, running across the fields before my friend's bull got you, eating raw turnips (I still love them raw) out of the field that were destined for the pigs, running from swarms of bees, and playing at the local tip and steam train graveyard. You learnt not to stand at the back of the horse in case it kicked you, and not to enter the pig pen in case the sow eats you. You learnt to build a safe treehouse that didn't result in you plunging to the ground at 9.8m per second, per second. Life was simple and thinking about it now quite dangerous.

One of the things always celebrated at St Luke's Anglican Church in Mosgiel was Harvest Festival, and I know it was here. They had real reason to celebrate just as people in Jesus' time did. Being a farming district, some depended directly on the strength of the harvest to survive.

Some of us as children raided our Grandparents' veggie gardens and plumb trees after school when we were hungry rather than pleading to go to McDonalds.

I hope that for the Children and youth here today this Festival creates a lasting memory, grounded in where food comes from and who we have to thank.

Our “modern”, western tradition of celebrating Harvest Festival in churches began in 1843, when a Vicar in Cornwall invited parishioners to a special thanksgiving service at church. Victorian hymns such as "We plough the fields and scatter", "Come ye thankful people, come" and "All things bright and beautiful" are traditional at this time.

The Harvest Festival Service, is part of a long tradition for God’s people. It goes back a good 4,000 years.

There were three important Jewish festivals which all Jews attended.

1. The first festival was the Feast of Passover. It was usually at the beginning of the harvest and reminded them of their escape from Egypt under Moses.
2. The second festival was the Feast of Weeks or Harvest, where the Jews gave thanks to God for their crop. This festival occurred at the end of the barley harvest.
3. And the third festival was the Feast of Tabernacles, which occurred after the grape and grain harvest was over. And why wouldn’t you celebrate the grape harvest, after all that goes to make wine!

All three of these festivals reminded them of God’s blessing on his people.

At Harvest time we gather together to give thanks for the gifts that we have received, and to share what we have with those less fortunate.

It’s wonderful to see food being offered with open hearts for this celebration and for those in need, and it is a Christian imperative to look after anyone who is vulnerable and poor.

However, the purpose of our worship is not just a food bank drive. Part of it is to realise that we are not as self-sufficient as we think.

We need God, and we need each other. At times, we need help too, and a number of us have needed meals prepared and delivered, or transport provided for hospital and doctors’ visits and so on in recent times. You know what – we can’t do it all ourselves. We are built to be in community and balance with God, people, and creation.

And if the past 2 years has taught us anything, it is that life is much less in our control than we might think. We have all experienced the reality of going to the supermarket and seeing the shelves stripped of food and toilet paper and yeast.

The parable of the rich fool that has an abundance of possessions and stores up grain and goods that we heard

today together with the reading from Cor 9 which talks about God loving a cheerful giver are often used on Stewardship Sunday. Of course, we are stewards of money and possessions, creation and all our gifts from God. Thank you for your generosity in all of these things.

It's a time to realise just how fortunate we are that we have a food supply that some in the world don't.

It's also a time to reflect on the effects of climate change on the world's food supplies and to think about how we might better care for God's creation.

Paul in the reading today talks about three specific ways that others will benefit when you give:

God will use your gifts to bless others (Cor 9:12-15)

- It will supply the needs of the saints (9:12). The poor will be fed. Churches will be planted. Missionaries will be supported. The gospel will be advanced.
- It will cause others to thank God and give glory to him (9:12-13). When you give, you will be an answer to someone else's prayer. When God uses you to meet their needs, they will thank and glorify God as a result of your gift.

- It will bring you closer to others (9:14). They will long for and pray for you because of your generosity to them.

The benefits of giving to others are clear, but what about the benefits of giving to us?

Guess what, God blesses generous givers. Verses 8-10 of our Corinthians reading is all about that.

⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹ As it is written,

“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness^[a] endures forever.”

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.^[b] ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;

Paul teaches us that there are two ways to fail at giving.

- If you give generously but not joyfully, you've given the wrong way.
- If you're joyful but not generous, you've failed.

God wants us to give at the intersection of generosity and joy.

Of course, there are other types of harvest too. There is also the Harvest of souls that we are called to do, and that has a relationship with thanking God and sharing our abundant harvest with others.

In John 4:34 Jesus refers to the fields being ripe for harvest, but in this case, Jesus is referring to us reaping a spiritual harvest by going out and telling people about the Kingdom of God.

Jesus has given us the gift of God and he is wanting us to go and share the message with others, to create disciples so that they will share abundantly in this life and everlasting life.

The great commission calls on us to reap a spiritual harvest and there are two readings from the bible that speak into that for me. You will know them by heart I'm sure:

Number 1: In Mark 12, v30 -31, when Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment he replies, talking about the essence of what it is to be a disciple:

"The most important one is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Number 2: We also read in **Matthew 28, v18 – 20**, that we're all called to help other people follow Jesus, and be his disciples too.

"Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

We can't do one, without the other. Being a follower of Jesus Christ, means patterning our lives after Jesus, and seeking to love both God and those around us wholeheartedly. But that's only part of the story; as we see in the lives of the disciples in the early church, they followed, but as well as

being disciples, they also learned how to make disciples.
Disciples making Disciples.

So, let's Praise God of all creation: for it's through your
goodness that we have all of the Gifts we have to share,
Accept and use our offerings for your glory and for the
service of your kingdom. **Amen**