

Harvest Thanksgiving

2 October 2022

O ALMIGHTY God and heavenly Father, we glorify thee that we are once more permitted to enjoy the fulfilment of thy gracious promise, that, while the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest shall not fail. Blessed be thou, who hast given us the fruits of the earth in their season. Teach us to remember that it is not by bread alone that man doth live; but grant that we may feed on him who is the true bread which cometh down from heaven even Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour; to whom with thee, O Father, and thee, O Holy Spirit, be honour and glory, for ever and ever. Amen. (BCP p.617)

Each of us have sat in the pews for many a Harvest Thanksgiving homily that have highlighted the great wealth of our country and our communities. How fortunate we are as Canadians to enjoy food and shelter in abundance. We give thanks for the ability to gather and to feast. Our worship space is beautifully decorated with the fruits of the harvest (a special thanks to Liz and her team). Likewise, our homes are adorned with decorations declaring that we are 'blessed', that we 'gather together', and that we 'give thanks'.

To be sure, it is right to offer our thanks to God for his provision, as we have in years past and do again today. It is true that we live in a country of abundance. But it would be tone-deaf to assume that all in our communities, including this gathered community of St. George's, are feeling that they are living abundantly at the moment.

These past few years have been difficult, and we have known hardship in new and varying ways. People are worried about their finances ("Financial stress storm' just starting for working Canadians": Financial well-being of workers dives as costs soar, National Payroll Institute survey says."¹); people are worried about their livelihoods ("Stress levels soaring": Chamber of Commerce survey indicates majority of businesses are worried about inflation."²); people are worried about what they will eat ("Pressure is on' as London Food Bank and community meals deal with record need: Food programs in London, Ont. are striving to keep up with rising demands as record numbers of people access food support."³); and people are worried about where they will live ("Housing costs crippling major Canadian cities: In Canada's metropolitan cities, people are failing to find and keep affordable housing."⁴).

I spoke with a friend via Facetime (video call) this past week. Our chat personalized for me the situations that these headlines capture. She too had decorated for Thanksgiving. One of those wicker cornucopias sat empty in the frame behind her. I have yet to fill the cornucopia at our house, so in the course of conversation I asked her if she had found decorative gourds to fill hers; I was trying to be helpful, letting her know which grocery stores I had seen them at. She responded that she too had seen them when out grocery shopping, but that this year she needed all her grocery money for groceries, not for decorations.

This story and these headlines capture our worries; the present concerns us and of our neighbours. Compounding all of this is the ongoing reality that not all of us are able to gather. The Pandemic continues to keep families apart, and individuals isolated. We lack an abundance of community.

¹ *Financial Post*, 21 SEP 2022.

² *Winnipeg Free Press*, 22 SEP 2022.

³ *CBC News London*, 20 JUL 2022.

⁴ *CTV News*, 23 SEP 2022.

It is with this honesty about what we are experiencing and feeling as a community that we approach our Scripture readings today. If you have come here burdened with worry, for yourself or for those whom you love, you have heard Paul's invitation in his letter to the Philippians, "do not worry." It is much easier to live into, "do not worry," when we have little to worry about. Our concerns are genuine; we are not merely grumbling. Why should we not be worried?

First, we should not worry because it is unproductive. Before Paul asks the Church in Philippi not to worry, Jesus first invites his followers to relinquish their anxieties: ***"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life...Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"*** (cf. Matthew 6:25, 27). God wants us to be free from worry because it does not solve our problems.

Moreover, worrying is symptomatic not of our circumstances, but of our relationship with the Lord. If we are anxious about our lives, this demonstrates that we are not living in the freedom of knowing God as our provider. My children do not worry about how they will get home from school because they know me, and therefore trust me. Additionally, my actions have shown time and time again that I will always make sure that they are picked up safely. They are at peace about this. So it is with the Lord. If we know him by the name that he calls himself – I AM – than we know that he has been, and will always be, enough for us. The Bible recounts that throughout the history of humankind, God has never abandoned his people. Paul's words remind us: "The Lord is near," (Phil 4:5b NRSV). He is and will remain our provider.

If we are agreed that worrying has no benefit, but in fact hinders our relationship to God, how then are we to relinquish our anxieties, especially when we have pressing concerns? "By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God," (Phil 4:6b NRSV). Ask the Lord for what you need; do so with gratitude. Giving thanks is balm for worry, for it allows us to recall the many ways in which God is faithful to us. If we give thanks in faith, even when we don't feel like it, we are transformed by the action. Wants are parsed out from needs, and with God as our vision we can see the ways in which we have been abundantly blessed; blessed in areas that we were perhaps blind to previously.

We, the Church, practise thanksgiving communally, not just as individuals. By our act of prayerful petition with gratitude, we become generous out of our abundance. While worry leads to hoarding, gratitude leads to gentleness. Perhaps I have an abundance of food but lack companionship, and you have an abundance of friendship to give away but lack food. By offering what we have to each other, we know the joy of participating in God's work of provision. This is what it looks like to love God first and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

My friend, who I mentioned earlier, is a faithful woman. As our call continued, we spoke about her choice to keep her cornucopia out. She will keep it out this year as a testament to God's provision. The cornucopia, a symbol of abundance and nourishment, sits like an open palm waiting to receive. We too share a sign of abundance and nourishment as we approach this table, with our palms open as we anticipate receiving the Bread of Heaven, that is the Eucharistic feast. Here we know that in both feast and famine, we are utterly dependent upon the Lord. Here we never cease to experience that he is our provider.

This morning I began this sermon with the first collect for Harvest Thanksgiving from the Book of Common Prayer. As we close, I invite you to pray the second collect for Harvest Thanksgiving with me:

O MERCIFUL God, at whose bidding the earth withholdeth her increase, or rendereth her fruits in their season: Give us grace that we may learn, both from thy mercies and thy judgements, our entire dependence upon thee for the supply of our daily bread; and grant that we, remembering that thy blessings are for our trial as well as for our comfort, may with thankful hearts give unto thee of thine own, ministering gladly to the maintenance of thy Church, and the relief of the poor and the afflicted, the widow and the orphan, to the glory of thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP p. 618)

May it be so with us.