

Harvest and Kingdom – then, now, future

Sermon 10 October 2021 at the 08.30 BCP Communion service,
All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton
Bible Readings: Psalm 126 and Matthew 6.25-33

The last sentence in the Gospel reading is the key to today's sermon:

Seek first his kingdom...and all these things will be given to you.

As some Bible commentaries have it:

*The Christian disciple has only ONE priority;
God's kingdom, now and forever.*

That's very simple and at the same time demanding.

How do we live up to that?

We can find guidance in three aspects of today's service:

1. Harvest donations in 2021
2. The Book of Common Prayer
3. the Bible readings

Today we celebrate Harvest and bring gifts of food and everyday supplies.

We help Jimmy's Charity to support people who are homeless.

Today we use words direct from the Book of Common Prayer which was first published in English nearly 500 years ago, then finalised in 1662.

That made me think about what harvest time in 1662 was like for people in Cottenham. I asked one local farmer in the All Saints' congregation how that compared with the 21st century. It turns out there are some surprising similarities.

First let's go to the Book of Sewers, written in the 17th century. The word 'Sewers' has changed since then. Today it means those controversial waste pipes deep under Cottenham High Street that need replacing. They're not our favourite topic locally because the High Street will be closed for a few weeks, splitting the village in two. Travel in Cottenham will be difficult, to say the least!

In 1662 'sewers' meant field drains and ditches on farmland.

The Book of Sewers described the effects of 17th century floods in

Cottenham. Winter floods, controlled by ditches and drains, were good.

They made the fields very fertile for the summer. In good summers, farmers might get 20 shillings per acre for their crops. In today's money, that's about

£150 per acre. Apparently that's roughly the same value that today's Cottenham farmers might make in a good year. That was a surprise.

The downside in 1662 was in the areas called 'common grounds' which poorer people could use. A big increase in drains and ditches was bad. The commons land could become too dry and their cattle couldn't get enough grass or water. Some poorer people had to find pastures away from Cottenham. Some sank further into poverty and lost their homes, like people at Jimmy's today. Sadly, that is not a surprise.

As for Cottenham church in 1662, there probably wasn't the kind of Harvest service that we know. Oliver Cromwell, another controversial Cottenham connection, had been against people enjoying themselves too much. Harvest services today are fairly recent, started by the Victorians in the 1800s to make the whole event sober and respectable.

However, in earlier centuries, people celebrated Harvest at village events involving as much food, drink and dancing as possible. Perhaps harvest celebrations in Jesus's time were equally joyous. Farming was hard work in those times too. Harvest was a time to relax, once food for people and animals had been stored for the winter. Jesus loved a party, eating and drinking with friends. Unlike his cousin John the Baptist, Jesus did not live in the desert, eating little and dressing in animal skins. He and the disciples generally had enough to live on because others earned the money to support his ministry.

Luke 8.3 tells us:

Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, ... provided for them out of their resources.

Then in the reading from Matthew's Gospel Jesus **seems** to be saying something odd. Something like this:

Don't bother with growing things, making or buying clothes, finding food and drink. That's all so much work. Lie in the grass, watch the birds, enjoy the flowers.

Does that mean we should:

- not feed people at Cottenham Foodbank, just tell them not to worry?
- not bother to work if we're lucky enough to have a paid job?
- tell Jimmy's people they don't need warm accommodation in winter?
- tell our friends at Cottenham Community Allotment not to bother growing vegetables and fruit to give away?

Of course not. Jesus's words have to be read or heard in context. Just before today's passage in Matthew's Gospel Jesus is critical about attitudes to money for its own sake. Just after today's passage, Jesus tells people not to judge others because the final day of judgement was coming soon.

As the theologian Tom Wright says about today's reading:

Jesus had the skill, the gift, or living totally in the present, celebrating the goodness of God, here and now.

Jesus is reminding us that God created an amazing world for us to enjoy, to share happiness with others. Jesus calls us to put aside worry for at least a short time in our busy lives. Birds, flowers and grass; they all play a part in that, as they have always done. But they are not completely the point here.

Last weekend I met someone who's had serious health issues for at least the last ten years. Every stroke, every TIA, could be his last. He has to deal with pain and periods in hospital. But his approach to life is to take one day at a time, to thank God for that one day at a time and to enjoy whatever is possible that day. To go out for meals and a stroll along the river. To celebrate an unexpected last ten years. That is something like what Jesus was recommending. Do more smiling, worry less about tomorrow, do everything with joy.

In terms of theology, mentions of seeds and harvest in the Bible are often metaphors for life in the Kingdom of God, now and forever. In Psalm 126, the first reading for today, that's what those words mean:

Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.

Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Farm workers in 1662 in Cottenham did exactly that. They cut crops by hand and carried the sheaves to wagons in the fields. A farmer in 2021, probably alone on a giant combine harvester, produces sheaves on the very same fields. There's a positive outcome across the centuries. You can take the readings literally or metaphorically. Both work well.

The harvest story has especially close links with the whole life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We can understand it in so many ways, in words and in images. Here is the final verse in a poem by Malcolm Guite, based on the first reading for today, Psalm 126.

He connects that ancient Psalm about seeds and harvest to our faith in the risen Christ:

*The first fruit of that harvest once lay hidden
And sealed in secret in a garden tomb
But we will rise in him, for he is risen!*

There is life. There is death. There is resurrection. There is life eternal. So we come round to words in the Creed in today's Book of Common Prayer Communion booklet that you will find on page 3:

*God's kingdom shall have no end.
and
I look for the Resurrection of the dead,
And the life of the world to come.*

Finally

Here is that key message from Jesus again:

**Make your top priority God's kingdom, God's way of life.
Everything else will follow from that.**

Kingdom and Harvest were two of Jesus's favourite words. Today, we are Jesus's disciples and we celebrate God's world. It may not be easy but we can enjoy one day at a time. We can share freely with others. It's the only way to live. Better by far than anxiety and worry!
Amen.