

27 February 2022 - Harvest

Isaiah 55:10-13

1 Corinthians 13:51-58

Luke 6:39-49

This past year has had me thinking, for the first time in my lifetime (so far as I recall), about the availability of food. National and international supply chain difficulties due to the Covid pandemic have at different times resulted in us finding supermarket shelves empty of certain products we are used to having available all year round. Labour shortages have made it difficult, and continue to make it difficult, for New Zealand's agriculturalists to bring in the harvest of many different fruit and grain crops – with who knows what effect on the supply to consumers in the months ahead.

Harvest festivals are common to many cultures around the world, and have ancient origins. At their root these festivals reflect humankind's vulnerability to the possibility of food shortage. Our very lives depend on the production of food, and that food production is often a precarious business – dependent on so many things beyond our control. Famine has always been a risk for humankind.

Our forebears in the faith in ancient Judaism had a variety of harvest festivals – some at the beginning, and others at the end, of the harvest of various crops – and in each festival thanks is offered to God for his provision, for the abundant goodness of God.

It is a reflection too of the reliance upon farming in its various forms that we find agricultural images featuring prominently in Scripture, where fruitfulness and abundance depict the goodness of God and the blessedness of God's people receiving his benefits.

In Isaiah 55, the prophet gives voice to a beautiful vision from God:

¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return to it without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.
¹³ Instead of the thorn-bush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the LORD's renown,
for an everlasting sign, that will endure for ever.'

Israel was a subsistence agricultural economy, where the amount of annual precipitation could mean the difference between life and death. This image of watering and the resultant flourishing, is a profound picture of God's work which would have brought great hope to the citizens of Jerusalem and Judea languishing in exile in Babylon.

Isaiah 55 contains the promise of return, a return from exile that will be met with rejoicing. In the vision Israel goes out from exile and is led forward in the journey back to their homeland:

¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

These verses involve exaggeration and personification – trees don't have hands of course, and mountains and hills don't have voices. This vivid picture language highlights the joy that would accompany a return from the hardship and depression of exile. But it's worth noting too that many scriptures suggest that, as well as humankind, the rest of creation has its own relationship with God – so that the mountains and trees might well be interested in, *invested in*, the activity of God among humankind.

There are deep echoes here of the Creation and Fall narratives of the first few chapters of Genesis. Genesis begins with the word of God: God speaking creation into being. Here in Isaiah the vision reminds the exiles that God's word is powerful and effective, it accomplishes its purposes. The echo suggests that God is going to speak something new into being: a return from exile would be, for those held in Bablyon, a new creation.

One of the products of the Fall – humankind's rebellion – is brokenness in creation, a loss of its natural productivity and provision of what is good for humankind. We read in Genesis 3 that God says to Adam:

'Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.

¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food
until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken;
for dust you are and to dust you will return.'

And now in Isaiah in the echo of these Genesis verses, the exiles are promised that God's word will bring about a reversal and renewal that will be like a renewed earth which will once again

bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

¹³ Instead of the thorn-bush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.

Over recent weeks we have worked our way through chapter 15 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It is a chapter all about resurrection. Based on the Christian conviction that Jesus Christ had been raised to renewed life after a time of death, Paul was able to assert that this is the realistic future for all the

faithful. And in verse 20 of 1 Corinthians 15 he uses a harvest metaphor to express this, writing emphatically

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

The festival of the firstfruits was a harvest festival. It took place at the beginning of the wheat harvest, and we read in Leviticus 23 that God commanded,

When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the Lord so it will be accepted on your behalf...

The offering of the firstfruits to God in thanksgiving was a reflection of trust that God would bring about the successful completion of the harvest.

When Paul describes the risen Christ as “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” in death, the point he is making is that Jesus is the first to be raised from death, and is the first of many many more. In Jesus we see the example of what, through him, is going to be possible for us all. Our Christian hope is for a bodily resurrection.

And again this promise of life in the age to come is not limited to humankind. It has significance for the whole of creation.

The Bible points to the renewal of creation, not its destruction. Romans 8 speaks of creation now being subjected to futility, but then being set free from its bondage to corruption, obtaining the glorious freedom of the children of God. Revelation 21 says that, in the coming of the new heaven and the new earth, God will make all things new. Colossians 1 says that God will reconcile *all* things through Christ, whether on earth or in heaven.

And given this, we have work to do. As Paul said at the conclusion of his great resurrection discourse in 1 Corinthians 15:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

Whilst it is God who builds his kingdom, we are called to be builders *for* the kingdom.

Tom Wright has written in relation to this passage,

If it is true that God is going to transform this present world and renew our whole selves, bodies included, then what we do in the present time with our bodies, and with our world, matters. For far too long many Christians have been content to separate out future hope from present responsibility, but that is precisely what Paul refuses to do. His full-bodied doctrine and promise of resurrection sends us back to our present world, and our present life of bodily obedience to our Lord, in the glorious but sobering knowledge that, if there is continuity between who and what we are in the present and who and what we will be in the future, we cannot discount the present life, the present body and the present world as irrelevant.

On the contrary. It is a matter of the greatest encouragement to Christian workers ... getting on faithfully and quietly with their God-given tasks, that what they do 'in the Lord' during the present time will last, will matter, will stand for all time. How God will take our prayer, our art, our love, our writing, our political action, our music, our honesty, our daily work, our pastoral care, our teaching, our whole selves – how God will take this and weave its varied strands into the glorious tapestry of his new creation, we can at present have no idea. That he will do so is part of the truth of the resurrection, and perhaps one of the most comforting parts of all.¹

The concepts of words and fruitfulness are prominent in our Gospel passage today too. Continuing his teaching to his disciples (in what is often termed the Sermon on the Plain), Jesus has been talking about authenticity: authentic love, authentic teaching, authentic witness and service. To be a true follower of Christ must be something that involves the whole of our beings. We cannot pay lip-service to it, because ultimately that will be found out. Our fruit – in

¹ Wright, *Paul*, p.228

actions and words – will, over time, reveal the true disposition of the heart, our inner life, our real thoughts and feelings.

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit,” Jesus says. To be a true fig tree, to produce good figs, one needs to be a healthy fig from leaf to root. The transformation involved in being a true disciple must go all the way down. “Jesus is inviting his hearers to a way of life which is so completely new that it will need a change of heart, a change deep down in the personality.”²

Then as we attend to our hearts we too become part of the ongoing work of the word of God; we too are caught up in God’s work of renewal and restoration.

Today as we give thanks for harvest, for God’s provision for our daily needs, may our harvest thanksgiving and harvest offering symbolize our willingness to have God’s renewing, recreating word take root in our hearts; may we be participants in spreading the seed of his word abroad; and in the midst of the spiritual famine which holds the world today in its grip, may we be working in anticipation of the time when God brings in the full harvest of which Christ is the firstfruits.

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² Wright, *Luke*, pp.77-78