

⁹ When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

Leviticus 19:9,10

First of all could I thank your Rector for the invitation to join you for your Harvest Thanksgiving. St Doolough's has a particular place in the life and history of the Christian Church in this part of Ireland. We in Howth, as we emerge from our own restoration project, wish you well in your own work of preserving this jewel of the Church in these parts for future generations as a place of witness and worship.

The verses I took as my text come from the Book Leviticus, one of the great Law books of the Bible. It is a book that we don't tend to read from very often and I would certainly rarely preach from it. We would tend to raise our eyebrows at some of the regulations that we find it that we would never seek to impose today, such as laws relating to slavery.

Having said that, there lies behind these codes a basis attitude that has stood the test of time, one that is relevant in every generation. It is a basic attitude of reverence for our fellow man that arises out of a reverence for God. The command that I took as my text ends with the declaration, 'I am the Lord your God.'

In all our business dealings, we are used to talking about profit margins. Costs have to be kept under control, waste and inefficiency must be reduced. So there is something counter intuitive, if not slightly ridiculous in the command, 'You shall not reap to the very edges of your field you shall leave it for the poor and the alien.' There is at the very heart of the Old Testament Law a fundamental recognition of our obligation to the other, the one on the margins, the poor and the alien. This is not an optional extra, this is an integral part of our service and worship of God.

We in Ireland, even in the bleakest of recent times, was still one of the richest countries in the world. I recall, when I was in Mountmellick Parish, one farmer admitting to me after a Harvest Festival at the end of a fairly brutal summer that, bad as the summer had been, he could not say he could recall a summer when there had been no harvest to be thankful for; that there are parts of the world where no skill or effort could make up from the ravages of drought or flood.

And so the unreaped corners of the field were to be left for the poor and the alien. You shall not be greedy or grasping and make every penny for yourself, your family and your friends. You are to share with those in need.

Very few of us in this part of the world are farmers – but I want to use this concept of not reaping to very corners of our fields as we reflect on life in general.

We should not seek to reap the entire field of time for ourselves. In the hustle and bustle of everyday life it is very easy to fill up our time. We can be so busy doing things that we crowd out the time we should be spending with others. We fall into the trap of trying to reap the whole field of time for ourselves.

We can crowd out the time we spend with our family. It is very easy isn't it? This has to be done, this meeting has to be attended, this person has to be met – and before we know it our family are pushed into the background. And yet time spent with family cements relationships that grow with the years.

We can crowd out the time we spend with those who need our comfort or advice – very easy to say to someone, 'I'm sorry, I'm terribly busy – do drop around another time and we can have a good chat.' Sometimes it is because we don't have the time but all too often it is because we don't want to make the time. We try to reap the whole field of time for ourselves.

We can crowd out the time we share with God. In this heavily pressurised world in which more and more is happening on a Sunday – work, sports, shopping – time for prayer, time for worship is crowded out – and we are actually the poorer for it as the old biblical concept of Sabbath, with its cycle of work and rest is lost.

Looking at the wider field of life – we never in fact reap everything we sow. The farmer in the field sows the corn, the rain and sun bring on and ripen the grain until the corn is ready for harvest. The farmer who sows it was not

intended to reap everything he had sown – that at the edges was for the poor and the alien. In the field of human relationships we never in fact reap all we sow. Our lives are so inter-related that we have influences on all sorts of people. The kind and helpful word sown in simple human charity can bring a harvest of joy and peace in the field of someone else's life. Just as easily the uncharitable or evil action can blight someone else's life. In our own day we have seen how radical groups using the internet to spread their twisted ideology can warp young impressionable minds to commit awful acts. Those groups may not reap what they sow but countless numbers of innocents will.

We should never reap the entire field of our resources for ourselves alone. We are but stewards of all we possess. Collectively we are all stewards of this wonderful, fragile planet. In recent years we have seen signs of a progressive change in our climate. A few years ago we were in Norway and we visited a glacier – in the previous 20 years it had retreated over a mile up the valley. We are seeing signs of a reduction in the icecaps and rises in sea levels. The rise in levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are causing measureable increases in global temperatures and increase in the number of extreme weather conditions be they hurricanes, floods or droughts – and still leaders and people say we are not prepared the sacrifice of reduced consumption, reduced prosperity. We in the more prosperous parts of the world can no longer expect the poor and the marginalized of the third world to pay the price for our prosperity.

What I have been trying to think about is the wider harvest field of life. The early Jewish farmer was instructed to leave the edges of his field unreaped for

the poor and the alien. In this God is asking us not to reap the field of life to its very edges – not to take everything for ourselves. The time that God has given us – we must be able to share – with our families and those who need our help and sympathy. Unconsciously we sow seeds in the lives of others the fruit of which they will have to reap. Let us ensure that the seed we sow is good seed that will yield a rich harvest of goodness in the lives of others. This very earth on which we live – it is not their to be exploited for the benefit of the rich and the privileged of this earth. It is God's gift to us all, to be cherished and protected for the benefit of all.

Do not reap to the very edges of your field – I am the Lord your God.