

Link to a short act of worship <https://youtu.be/pGvE19YFWY4>

In the ordinary course of events, this Sunday St Mary's Church in Howth would have been decorated for our annual Harvest Thanksgiving. It is one of those 'feel good' days in the Church year. I always love opening up the Church on a Harvest morning – there is that lovely smell that has settled on the Church.

It has its roots in rural life, dating back to 1847 when the vicar of a Parish in Cornwall organised a special service to offer thanks for the blessings of harvest. From there it spread right across Britain and Ireland.

Of course, it is not only here that there is a giving of thanks for the blessings of Harvest – it is reflected in other countries. I remember one year we were camping in the South of France in Avignon around the time the grape harvest. There was a local festival of the pressing of the first grapes. On that occasion in the Cathedral in Avignon, the offertory procession included some rather nice looking bottles of wine brought forward by the owners of local chateaux.

In the Book Deuteronomy, the people of Israel, as they prepared to enter the promised land were called to thankfulness, that each year, as they gathered their harvest, the first fruits of the harvest were to be dedicated to God. In our reading today from Deuteronomy, the people are reminded never to forget the ultimate source of their blessings.

¹⁷Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gained me this wealth.' ¹⁸But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today.

Deut 8:17ff

This is where Harvest, and the message of Harvest moves out from the simply rural and speaks to all people in every generation, both urban and rural. It will apply to the harvest of the sea, the boats that go out each day from here in Howth; to all of man's technological innovation, as we are reminded:

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We are reminded that this world is a gift, and we are but stewards of that gift. We are not all powerful – as we are being brutally reminded in the current crisis in the face of the Coronavirus, Covid 19. We are but creatures of this world; very sophisticated creatures, but creatures none the less, subject to forces greater than ourselves, subject to mortality. We have also learned in the course of this crisis, the importance, the value of people we may have taken for granted, our health workers, teachers, supermarket staff, those who empty our bins.

In our new found humility in the face of forces of nature, we discover that we are stewards, not outright owners of this world, held in trust for future generations. In the Book Leviticus, the Hebrew farmer was instructed:

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. 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*

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 concern for the other is not an optional extra, this is an integral part of our service and worship of God.

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. We are seeing signs of a reduction in the ice caps and rises in sea levels that are beginning to accelerate. The rise in levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere are causing measurable increases in global temperatures and an increase in the number of extreme weather events be they hurricanes, floods or droughts. We have seen disastrous fires on the west coast of the United States and Australia as a result of the extreme heat and dry conditions. Even in the face of all this society is reluctant to pay the price of reduced consumption, reduced prosperity as witnessed in the voices of different interest groups as the Government prepares to bring forward legislation to move us towards a less carbon dependant economy. We in the more prosperous parts of the world can no longer expect the poor and the marginalised of the third world to pay the price for our prosperity.

There is a responsibility upon humanity as a whole to act, even at this late stage, to protect our fragile environment, to insist on justice for the poor, not just in the immediate provision of emergency aid, but, more importantly in ensuring justice in the whole area of international trade and the indebtedness of nations crippled by natural disaster.

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche community, once said, when challenged on how the God he worships could allow the poor to die,

responded: ‘Don’t ask how can God allow the poor and starving to die – ask how can God allow the rich not to share?’