

‘I will never again curse the ground. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter will not fail.’ *Genesis 8:22*

First of all might I say how delighted I was to accept Rev Tim’s invitation to come and preach at the Harvest Thanksgiving in Coolbanagher. I have some lovely memories of this part of the world and its people.

Harvest Thanksgiving in Dublin is a lovely excuse to decorate our Churches but I was always aware that here in the country there was a real connection with daily living as you learn to live and work with the different seasons, the different conditions. As I think back to this time in my life, I often recall one lady in Rosenallis, after a Harvest Thanksgiving at the end of a particularly brutal summer, quoting that passage from Genesis to me, remarking that while harvests may not always be great, she couldn’t remember a time when there was not a harvest to be thankful for.

This particular year has been a strange year. We have had spells of very good weather and spells of pretty awful weather. So from the comfort of my Dublin Rectory I would say that there are some here who may not be singing ‘All is safely gathered in’ with the same enthusiasm of others, for whom the words ‘While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter will not fail.’ will have been said more in pious hope than certainty.

But if you will bear with me, I just want to reflect on a number of truths about God and his creation and our place in that.

The first is **there is a basic order underlying the created world.** Whatever we may say about man, the physical universe obeys fundamental laws laid down at the very dawn of time that govern its very existence. It was that that drew me into my love of science and then, as a rather sceptical teenager into the whole area of faith.

There is a story of a Rector who once a year used to preach on the subject of astronomy. His hapless congregation were subjected to a detailed description of the interactions of the various planets that they could see in the night sky. One of his curates, who realised that he was talking way above their heads, tackled him on it. ‘Why do you do this?’ The old man admitted that he was probably right – but then observed ‘but it greatly enhances my concept of God.’

In our modern world, with man seeming to gain more and more power to control the world, our concept of God is in danger of becoming too small. Man is placed at the centre of things and God is edged out onto the edge both in our understanding of his power and also the time we are prepared to give to him in our frenetic schedules. We have lost sight of the majesty and the grandeur of God. Those of you who work the land have still that sense of connection between creation and creator. Harvest time, as we reflect on the riches and variety of creation encourages us to enlarge our concept of God.

The promise to Noah in Genesis also **emphasises the processes of life’s development.** Seed time and harvest; one leads into the other. The harvest cannot happen without the seedtime. Before you can reap your harvest, the

seed has to be thrown into the ground and buried in trust. Only then can the grain bring forth new life. You only get what you sow in the ground. If you sow barley you get barley, if you sow wheat you get wheat, if you sow weeds, then weeds is what you will get. Of course what applies in the field will also apply in life. We sow either well in our beliefs and attitudes or actions – and we, or our children, will reap the corresponding fruit in the form of the sort of person we grow into spiritually, physically or mentally.

Also, part and parcel of the promise is **the contrast of conditions that we come across in life**. Cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will not cease. In their proper place all are necessary for a healthy harvest. The frost and cold of winter break up and condition the soil. The rain, so essential to ensure adequate supplies of water for wells and springs, to ensure that the earth is moist enough for the seed to germinate and the plant to grow into a healthy adult specimen. Then also the warmth of summer to bring on and swell the grain and ripen it ready for harvest.

In our own day to day lives we experience the need for different conditions for different aspects of our lives. There is the need for physical activity to keep the body in tone as well as times of rest. There is the need for mental rest and mental activity to keep our minds in tune and stimulated. There is also need for spiritual rest and spiritual activity; times of calling upon God in prayer and praise, reflecting on his word, receiving the sacraments and also times of quiet, letting God speak to us in the still small voice. This is where the Jewish concept of Sabbath has a great deal to say to us. Rev Tim, you and I will well recall the Ballymena Sabbath with the swings in the playground tied up on a

Sunday. That sort of legalism undermined the whole concept of Sabbath as a day of rest and gladness, a time for stepping back from producing, from consuming and simply resting, a day for worship, a day for families, a day for refreshment; a day for restoring balance in our busy and hectic lives.

One of the features of recent years has been the troubling signs of changes in our climate patterns. There are worrying signs that man, who over the years has gained a power unimagined in earlier times, is now beginning to change the delicate balance of the environment, to change the patterns of climate in a way that threatens the very future of our planet. We are already starting to see rises in sea levels, greater fluctuations in temperatures, more violent weather patterns in some parts, prolonged drought in others impacting the populations of some of the poorest parts of the world - unless, of course, it is all a myth to suit the Chinese.

So for some seed times and harvest are failing. Is it any wonder that people are leaving these areas to seek a better life for themselves and their families? The fact remains that the earth as a whole still produces enough food to feed the entire world. There is a responsibility upon humanity as a whole to act, even at this late stage, to protect our fragile environment, to insist upon justice for the poor, not just in immediate provision of food, 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 L'Arche, once said, having been challenged on how the God he worships could allow the poor to die responded; 'Don't ask how God can allow the poor and the starving die – ask instead, how can God allow the rich not to share?'