

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Evening Service on Sunday 27th September 2015
by Rev Martin Wellings**

There was a fascinating television series on this summer called *Edwardian Farm*. Actually, I think it was a repeat, and it built on the success of an earlier series called *Victorian Farm*. I saw a couple of the *Victorian Farm* programmes and was so inspired that I went out and bought the DVD of the series and the book that went with it! I suppose that part of my interest was related to family history, because my family tree includes plenty of agricultural labourers, and so the re-creation of a working farm as it might have been in the 1880s gave me an idea of the life some of my ancestors would have lived. But even for people without a family tree full of what the genealogists call 'Ag Labs', the programmes were insightful as well as entertaining, exploring the crafts, the skills, the challenges, the risks, the triumphs and the calamities of life in the nineteenth century countryside.

I found it particularly interesting to see how Victorian agriculture sits between modern twenty-first century farming and the world of Jesus and the gospels. Our Victorian great-great grandparents were great innovators. They brought scientific knowledge and engineering skill to bear on farming, and they made agriculture more productive and more efficient than it had ever been before. The programme showed some of the machinery that they developed, and their ingenuity was remarkable. And yet farming remained very labour intensive in those days, very vulnerable to pests and diseases – no chemical herbicides and pesticides available - and very dependent on the weather. Like the farmers Jesus knew and watched and talked about, Victorian farmers trod a precarious path between prosperity and disaster, and they could only really breathe easily when the harvest was successfully completed. It was the Victorians, of course, who invented Harvest Festivals, replacing the traditional and riotous Harvest Home with something a bit more decorous! Many of our harvest hymns and customs reflect the way they approached this festival. What I want to do this evening is to ask how we, more than a century later, come to the Harvest Festival, and I want to make four suggestions.

So let me suggest, first of all, that **we approach the Harvest Festival with thanksgiving for creation.**

For much of human history harvest thanksgiving has been focussed very specifically on having enough food to eat for the coming year. As the traditional harvest hymn says, breathing a huge sigh of gratitude and relief: 'All is safely gathered in, ere the winter storms begin.' And for many people in our world today, that remains true. Not quite so for us, though. We aren't subsistence farmers. We don't grow our own food. Even if the harvest is poor in this area or this country, we can import what we need from somewhere else, and all we notice is an increase in prices in the supermarkets. So we aren't nervous about famine. Our harvest thanksgiving isn't primarily a matter of knowing that we won't starve in the winter.

But giving thanks is still a significant aspect of what we're doing here today. Perhaps we take a slightly different line to our forebears. We rejoice in the beauty, the abundance, the fruitfulness and the intricacy of the world around us. When Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Consider the lilies of the field,' he has a lesson for us. 'Consider,' he says. Observe thoroughly. Look carefully. Learn well. Pay attention to God's world. Give it time, and take in

what you see. A lesson for these days of instant gratification, of one sensation tripping over another, and of people whose lives are too full to heed the poet's injunction to 'stand and stare.' I'm blessed with a large garden, and the study in the manse looks out over the garden, and thanks to the gardeners who come and keep the garden tidy, that's a great joy! I was working at my desk a few days ago when a squirrel came and started excavating the lawn. I'm not sure if it was planning to bury something, or if it was looking for something it had buried and lost, but it was a fascinating sight, just to watch it. And for those of us who don't really approve of squirrels, and think of them as rats with a good PR agent, there's been a green woodpecker in the garden too, for me to watch and admire, and a pair of jays, and an acrobatic fox. Whether our encounters with creation involve gardening or allotments, country walks, staring out of the window when you're supposed to be writing a sermon, listening to David Attenborough on the radio or watching *Big Cat Diary* on the television, we can celebrate God's world and give thanks for it. The Harvest Festival allows us to do that, and to bring into worship the sights and scents and textures of creation. If you'd rather look at the harvest display than listen to the sermon today, I guess Jesus wouldn't mind! After all, you're doing what he said, paying attention to God's wonderful world!

Second, **we approach the Harvest Festival**, I suspect, **with some concern about the well-being and resilience of our planet.**

We're planning a special service on the evening of Advent Sunday this year. Not an Advent Carol service, but a reflective and prayerful service on the eve of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris.

We are becoming increasingly aware, aren't we, of the damage that is being done to our world by human beings. Climate change is the big problem: although there are people who debate the details and even deny the underlying premise, most scientists seem to be agreed that the greenhouse gases produced by our industries and aeroplanes and motor cars and other pollutants are raising the temperature of the planet. The consequences are rising sea levels, droughts and desertification, and changes in the weather. That old story of Noah's Flood becomes much more pertinent as Pacific islands face obliteration and as millions of people in low-lying areas of South and South East Asia may start to move to escape the sea. Meanwhile we continue to throw our rubbish into the oceans and to cut down the rainforests – there was a frightening piece on the radio a week or two ago about the rate of loss of irreplaceable habitats and of the rare and unique species which live in them.

Can the world cope with human beings? That's a very modern question, posed by the environmental challenges of our time. It's also a very ancient question. Genesis asks it. In the story of Noah, God has his doubts, doesn't he? People make such a mess of things that God decides to wipe them out and start all over again. The passage we read this evening is a hopeful one, because in it we find Noah and his family leaving the ark, re-establishing themselves on dry land and receiving a promise from God about the permanence of the seasons: 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind,' says God, 'nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.' But does that mean that God will protect us from the consequences of our recklessness? There's a recurring theme in the Bible of people bringing down catastrophe on their heads, and of God saving a remnant, and starting over again. That may be the scenario we face, if we fail to work together to care

for our planet. God's covenant with Noah is not a licence to do as we like with God's world, relying on him to bail us out.

Third, we may approach the Harvest Festival with some anxiety about our own circumstances.

One of the great successes of our lifetime, I think, has been the growing commitment to Fair Trade. Truly we have come a long way since the days of the first "campaign coffee", which, as I recall it, left a nasty mark round the rim of the cup and could probably have doubled up as paint stripper! As the country has marked time economically, though, I've begun to wonder how the Fair Trade movement has stood up under the pressure of the credit crunch. I wonder how many people see Fair Trade as a bit of a luxury? I hope they don't, but these are anxious times for many folk. Whether it's credit card bills, mortgages, the threat or reality of redundancy or just the rising cost of the household basics, like food and heating and lighting, people may well be in difficulties. And this gives bite to the words of Jesus in Matthew 6 and to Paul's remarks to Timothy.

'Don't worry,' says Jesus. Actually, he says it twice! 'Don't worry!' And why not? Well, worrying won't help. It won't make any difference. You won't live any longer by fretting. And Jesus could have added that you may make things worse by getting in a state about them! So worrying is a waste of time and a waste of energy. More important, God, who cares for the birds and the flowers, also cares for us. I suspect that the Ancient World wasn't too struck on Nature, because Jesus is almost saying, 'If God is bothered about such insignificant things as birds and common wild flowers, of course he'll be concerned about you!' And then, we should have a different sense of priorities, focussing on God's will and his rule in the world, and not on food and drink and clothes. Hm. I think that verse needs careful handling. If someone is cold or hungry, chances are that they will be thinking mainly about getting warm and getting fed. That's not bad or sinful; it's the most natural thing in the world. So I don't think that Jesus is encouraging his disciples to cultivate a sort of other-worldly detachment which rises above the life of ordinary people and which claims to be far too spiritual to be bothered with food and clothes. After all, that sort of life is possible only for those who have other people to look after them! I think, rather, that Jesus is saying that the pursuit of possessions is a blind alley. We're not here in order to accumulate more and more stuff. Paul says the same when he reminds Timothy that 'if we have food and clothing we will be content with these.' (1 Tim 6:8). In other words, our real needs are fairly modest. We can trust God for these things, for our 'daily bread', and concentrate on seeking God's kingdom, inside us and in the world. To strive for other things is a mistake.

And that takes me on to my fourth and final point. **We may approach the Harvest Festival with an awareness of the pitfalls of wealth.**

In Jewish and Christian traditions there are two quite different approaches to wealth and prosperity. One sees affluence as a blessing and as a mark of divine favour. This understanding is strongly represented in the Old Testament – think, for example, of the prosperity of the patriarchs, the wealth of Solomon and the advice dished out in the book of Proverbs. There's not so much of this in the New Testament, but it appears time and again in the history of the Church. I read recently a biography of a nineteenth century Methodist businessman who did very well for himself. His biographer even quoted the words of Jesus: 'Seek ye first the

kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you.’ And the biographer said that the businessman did indeed seek first the kingdom, and lots of other good things **were** added unto him, and he became very wealthy! In our own time we have seen TV evangelists and other dodgy characters peddling a so-called prosperity gospel: have faith, and God will make you rich!

The other approach is the absolute opposite of this. It focuses on God’s closeness to the poor and the vulnerable, and it is very aware of the dangers of affluence. Rich people, it says, are reluctant to face the life-changing implications of following Jesus. Love of money, says Paul, is a root of all kinds of evil. John Wesley was very worried that the Methodists might become wealthy, because he thought that riches led to pride and anger. In one of his letters he said this: ‘It is a sad observation that they that have the most money have usually least grace.’ A society which prizes money makes some greedy and others envious. It’s a very nasty combination.

So, what do we make of all this? And what do we do about it? Well, whatever our level of income and resources, we should beware of pride and greed. We should remember that whatever we have is a gift, and that we are charged to use it wisely, as good stewards of God’s generosity. We should cultivate that spirit of contentment which we find in 1 Timothy, and which is the antidote to the affluenza of our times – the wanting more and more, in a never-ending spiral of acquisition. We can offer to a money-obsessed culture a path to life in all its fullness, rejoicing in the sheer grace and love of God. The Harvest is a great reminder that we are the beneficiaries of God’s generosity, and it gives us an opportunity to give in return.

So we thank God today for all his gifts. We renew our commitment to care for the planet and to use all our resources faithfully as good stewards of God’s overwhelming generosity. And we affirm our trust in God, for daily bread and eternal joy. Amen.