

## Harvest 2015

Readings: Ex. 16:1-18, Psalm 65 & Matt. 6:25-34

What comes to mind when we think about harvest festival?

As more and more people live in towns and cities the importance of the agricultural and horticultural industries can become forgotten. The teacher in class asked the question, “Where does milk come from?”, “from the supermarket, Miss” came the answer. Urban dwellers have a disconnect between the source of the food and those who grow and harvest it and the hygienically wrapped products in the supermarket.

On the other hand, for those of us coming from the Northern Hemisphere the whole idea of harvest in Lent is topsy-turvy. As those of you attending the Lent course would have found out the origin of the word Lent is derived from the old English word for spring. Although with the regrowth coming from the recent rain after the summer drought, perhaps it does appear it bit like spring at present!

The strength of the Christian calendar is to celebrate and remind us of the truths about our faith that we know, but too frequently we forget or lose sight of or perhaps just get things out of balance. It's instructive to see in the Old Testament that God's provision of the Jewish feast days served as reminders to them of God's provision and His covenant. Three of the great feast days listed in Lev. 23 have a harvest connection – the Feast of Firstfruits, the Feast of Pentecost and the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. We have one harvest celebration they had three! In turn, the weekly celebration of the Sabbath was to remind them of God's covenant with them. Deut. 5:15 says “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

The Scriptures are full of reminders to remember and not to forget the goodness of God. “Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103:2), “I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds” (Psalm 77:11-12). Paul instructs the Ephesians “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:11-13). Remember the New Covenant!

Too often we suffer from amnesia and forget the goodness of God in providing all that we need.

So today I want us to consider God as our provider, God as our generous provider and what our response to that should be.

Firstly, God is our **provider** of all that we NEED.

In their wanderings in the wilderness, the people of Israel had to learn that God was their provider for their daily needs. In our reading from Exodus 16 we heard about the manna,

the whasit as it was called by the people. The manna came as a daily gift of daily bread from God. The people of God were being taught to live in daily dependence on God, their provider, even in the wilderness. He provided their need and then they chose how to prepare and cook the manna.

In Deuteronomy 8 we read:11-18 “Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Deut. 8:11-14), Prosperity and ease can make us forget that God is our Provider.

The passage goes on to say “Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day” (Deut. 8:17-18).

It is God who gives us power to get wealth, He is our Provider.

I remember visiting Mt Albert Baptist in 1989 and was interested to see that they combined a harvest festival service with a thanksgiving for work which enables us to buy the produce we give thanks for.

Paul in Philippians 4 says “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). Note the use of the words “every need of yours”, not all your wants. Too often we display the attitude of children “I want”, when our parents knew all too well what we needed. It is unfortunate that the old harvest hymn “Come ye thankful people come” had the line in it “God our Maker doth provide for all our wants to be supplied”. I see they have changed “wants” to “needs” in our hymn book version. Maybe it’s a change of meaning over the years. God knows our true needs.

In contrast, the world tries to tell us in its advertising that we need this or that or the other. I was interested to see an email that came in during the week from a shop entitled “Need now: essential luxury”, which illustrated exactly what I was thinking. It came in the same day as an email from Tear Fund entitled “Things are looking worse”, relating to the suffering of more than 12.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, almost half of whom are children, refugees from Syria and Iraq. It’s been called the “World’s largest humanitarian crisis since World War II.” And we only have to look at the aftermath of Cyclone Pam to see great real human need closer to home.

God not only is our provider He is our **generous** provider.

We had it in our reading from Psalm 65 “You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with abundance. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy” Psalm 65:11-13.

The passage speaks to us of overflowing abundance.

Consider the range of foods He has given to us; and each food can be prepared in different ways to give us greater variety in our diet and greater delight in eating; just think of the many ways in which you can use wheat – Weetbix, cakes, pastries, bread, noodles. (Sorry

to those who have a wheat allergy but I use it as an illustration.) Think of the range of fruit we can enjoy, God hasn't just given us one fruit to eat but a whole range of them from apples to cherries to tomatoes to bananas, to name but a few. Even within one fruit, like apples, there are thousands of different cultivars, each differing in size, shape, colour, skin type, season, texture, flavour. God is our generous provider. He even invites us to rearrange the genes within our crops to produce new varieties, we as it were can join in the creating of something new. Each seed of an apple is different genetically from its neighbour in the same fruit, there is enormous variation within God's creation yet to be revealed.

Paul refers to God who richly provides us with everything to enjoy in 1 Tim. 6:17.

So if God is our provider and our generous provider, what should our response be? At least three responses I would suggest – thankfulness, trust and generosity.

Firstly, **thankfulness**.

One of the reasons the Scriptures encourage us to remember the mercies of God is that we should be thankful.

It is instructive to see that each time Jesus took bread He gave thanks, whether it was before feeding the multitudes or at the Last Supper. My guess is that before each meal He would have used the Jewish prayer "Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth."

We are encouraged in the Scriptures to be thankful.

"We are to enter His gates with thanksgiving" (Psalm 100:4).

Take a passage like Colossians 3:15-17 "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Three times in that short passage Paul refers to thanksgiving.

Towards the end of his life, G.K. Chesterton was asked what was the most important lesson he had learnt, he replied "It was to take things with gratitude and not take them for granted."

Secondly, God's provision should cause us to trust Him.

God's generous provision for us should result in a deepening of our faith. We had it so clearly in our reading from Matthew's Gospel, don't be anxious about what you will eat, or drink or what you will wear. Don't be anxious, don't fret about these things. Every time we say the Lord's Prayer we make an incredible statement of faith when we say "Our Father". It's as if we say "God, because I believe You are my heavenly Father, I can trust You to provide for my needs, like any earthly father would care about his children's needs."

Our society is obsessed with possessions, we spend all our time in a frantic rush to accumulate things, and then we are anxious that there might be a better bargain tomorrow or a more up to date model coming out next week, or we become anxious that we might lose them or they might get stolen or break down. It is a far cry from the reassuring word from the Father, you are more worth than the sparrows, so don't fret about these things.

Just look at the flowers says Jesus! Many of us I know enjoy the beauty of flowers, there is something about their colour, their texture, the very arrangement of the petals that can be breathtakingly beautiful, yet so ephemeral. As Tom Wright says “Where did its beauty come from? It didn’t spend hours in front of the mirror putting on make-up. It didn’t go shopping in the market for fine clothes. It was just itself: glorious, God-given, beautiful.”

Paul kind of rearranges the thoughts of Matt. 6 in Romans 8:31-32 “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31-32).

I find the writings of Walter Brueggemann very thought provoking. (For those of you who don’t know him, Walter Brueggemann is an influential Old Testament scholar and theologian.) Listen to this:

“Jesus has come that we may have abundant life. His feeding narratives attest that the generosity of God is assured wherever Jesus rules in the earth and we count on that generosity. And that means, does it not, that our common practices of greed, of the pursuit of consumer goods, of the frantic effort to acquire more, are both inappropriate and unnecessary. Our society hungers always for more, more body surgery, more cosmetics, more cars, more beer, more sex, more certitude, more security, more money, more power, more oil ... whatever. This hunger for more is a true sign that we do not trust the goodness of God to supply all our needs, we do not trust that the generous rule of Jesus who has ascended to power is in effect. But we, we are Jesus people, and therefore we are pledged and empowered to act differently, differently in the neighbourhood, differently in the economy and ..... differently in the world.” Walter Brueggemann p5 “Mandate to difference”.

Thirdly, **generosity** should be the mark of God’s children, they are to display the character of their heavenly Father.

“Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honours him” (Psalm 37:21).

“The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives” (Proverbs 14:31).

“As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share” (1 Tim 6:17-18). Remember of course that all of us in this congregation are among the rich on a global scale.

As God is generous so we too are to be generous

Paul writing his second letter to the church at Corinth says “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God” (2 Cor. 9:8-12).

And so the circle of giving, receiving and thanksgiving is completed.

As we look at God's generous provision for us, may we be those who are thankful, generous and those who trust their heavenly Father to be faithful to His word. Amen.