**2 Chronicles 31:1-10**

**Harvest Festival**

Harvest Festival is a beautiful occasion in the calendar of the Church. Of course, it has changed a lot through the centuries as British society has moved further away from its agricultural base and more towards the economics of the city. But we don’t want to lose touch with the history of harvest festivals and so on a day like today, we happily sing ‘We plough the fields and scatter’, which is an activity few or none of us have ever done, of course.

But perhaps that doesn’t matter too much if we are prepared to think of Harvest Festival in a slightly broader context. The context for us in Enfield in the 21st-century is not so much how God has blessed *our personal crops* but to give thanks to God for his provision towards us and to give thanks for those people who labour so hard to provide our basic needs: the farmers, the gatherers, the transport companies, the Processing Plant personnel, the shopkeepers and the delivery companies. So many people are engaged in the food chain and at Harvest we give thanks for them all.

And behind all that is a deep sense of thanksgiving to God for his provision and the beauty of the created order that we can enjoy. And as we thank God for his goodness towards us, we must inevitably think about how we can share our blessings with others.

So, where do we start? There are three issues from this passage in 2 Chronicles that we heard read and if you want to follow it with me, you’ll find it on page 443 in the Old Testament, which is the first half of the Bible in the pews.

But first, as with any study of Scripture, we need to think a little bit about the context of the passage.

This story is set in the reign of King Hezekiah who was King of Judah in the 7th-century BC. Of course, the greatest kings in the Old Testament are David and Solomon. But Hezekiah runs a pretty close third place: he is the golden-boy of the Book of Chronicles; he wasn’t perfect, of course, but he was deeply honoured and respected.

One of the primary emphases of Hezekiah’s reign was to re-establish true worship throughout his kingdom. He was concerned that his people were becoming lost in the midst of a society that was becoming increasingly diverse and pluralistic: many different gods were being worshipped. And Hezekiah wanted to draw his people back to the worship of the true God. So Hezekiah’s reign was hallmarked by sweeping religious reforms: he reorganised the liturgy that was used in the Temple, he reorganised the roles of the servers and priests, he purged the Temple of any items that were deemed idolatrous, he centralized worship to only happen in the Temple, he brought in a new system of sacrifices. Crucially, he reinstated the Passover as a central aspect of Jewish worship: through the generations, observance of the Passover had almost died out but Hezekiah saw it as a crucial act of remembrance and a focus of national identity.

The Bible writers absolutely loved Hezekiah, of course, for all this. In 2 Kings 18:5, we read, “Hezekiah trusted in the Lord the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him”. Hezekiah was a good and godly king.

And so the passage we heard read relates part of the story of the process of re-establishing true religion in Judah. And perhaps as we think about how we can respond to God this Harvest with grateful hearts and think about how we can fulfil our responsibilities to a world in need, that is where we need to start; with a re-discovery of the true nature of religion. Because it’s when we become aware in a fresh way that the Christian faith is all about receiving the blessings of God, and then sharing those blessings with others, that we begin to get our community life in true perspective.

Verse 1 of this chapter puts it really strongly: “After the festival ended, all the people of Israel went to every city in Judah and broke the stone pillars, cut down the symbols of the goddess Asherah, and destroyed the altars and the pagan places of worship. They did the same thing throughout the rest of Judah, and the territories of Benjamin, Ephraim, and Manasseh”.

The people of God were meeting together for Festival Worship and they were so moved by God in their worship that they went out and smashed up anything they could find that was dishonouring to him. They were so intent on purifying their religion that they weren’t prepared to tolerate anything that stood between them and God.

And so it should be with us…We should be prepared to smash up the things in our own lives that are dishonouring to God and stand in the way of our worship. We should be prepared to get rid of all those things that stand in the way of us serving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

Perhaps that means getting rid of some personal possessions. Perhaps it means reorganising our time so we can read the Bible more. That will mean different things to different people. But it’s when we re-kindle the flame of our desire to serve God that our concern and compassion for others will rise to the surface and influence the way we live.

This passage in 2 Chronicles is about the sacrificial giving of God’s people. But it didn’t even begin until they made the sacrifices necessary in their own lives to draw close to God. Once they drew close to God, they were better able to serve others - and the same is true of us. Spiritual transformation can only happen if we first open our hearts to God in worship and let him create in us clean hearts and new attitudes.

As a Christian community, we are always on a journey into a deeper appreciation of God. And part of that journey is to be constantly rooting out those things that prevent us from serving him in purity and truth.

Secondly, in verse 4, the King puts out a decree for the people of Jerusalem to bring their offerings to the Temple. 10% was the tithe – that’s all that the King required of them. Now the people could have done that – they could have brought their 10% and gone away quite happily. But they didn’t: look what happens in verse 5 onwards…The people bring their offerings but it doesn’t stop there. It’s almost as if this outpouring of generosity takes on a life of its own and you can’t stop the people giving more and more and more. Everyone decides to get involved; not just the people of Jerusalem but throughout Israel people respond with their gifts. They bring their corn. They bring their wine. They bring their olive oil. They bring their farm produce. They bring their cattle, their sheep.

And it says in verse 7 that the gifts continued to pile up for four months! There was no limit to their generosity. They didn’t give grudgingly, they didn’t consider giving to be a pain in the neck or an intrusion into their privacy. It was a welcome opportunity for them to be generous. Why? Well this is the third point…

Because quite simply, as it says in verse 6, they saw their financial giving as an opportunity to give to God as well as to those in need. We are not talking about rich people here: this isn’t a story about Israel’s millionaires! This is a story about ordinary people, like you and me, who may not have much to offer at all. But they heard the call and they saw the need and whatever they could afford to give, no matter how large or small, they gave it.

And that is the spiritual transformation that God works in our hearts and our communities. Because what we give is a giving to God. We can’t give anything to God himself; there is nothing we have that he could need - he is all-mighty, all-majestic in power and glory. But as we give money into the collection plate, or bring our gifts for Harvest, we are able to minister more effectively to our community and those overseas. As we give into the collection plate, we give to these people and, ultimately, we give to God himself.

It is the attitude of giving that is so important; an attitude of sacrifice, an attitude of worship and an attitude of giving all we can to God, and then giving a little bit more. At some stage soon, I will preach a sermon on Financial Giving because it is an important topic for us to consider as part of our spiritual discipline. But at this stage, it is enough to say that Financial Giving is part of our worship and it is a response to the fact that God has first given to us.

Look at verse 10, the final words of this passage, in which Azariah says, “Since the people started bringing their gifts to the Temple, there has been enough to eat and a large surplus besides. We have all this because the Lord has blessed his people.”

It’s a strange spiritual principle – don’t ask me how this works, but it does: the more we give, the more we seem to receive from God. If we are prepared to be generous with our own possessions, then God blesses us in return, and we don’t go short. The feeding of the 5,000 contains an eternal principle about the overflowing generosity of God. We don’t give in order to get a blessing - but we do it in the assurance that God will bless us in the process

Today, we have celebrated Harvest Festival – God’s abundant blessing on us. Will we keep that blessing to ourselves? Or will we share it with others?

The message of this passage, quite clearly, is that we have a responsibility to give in the light of all that we have received. At the Primary School Harvest Service this week, I quoted from another preacher I heard once and he said this: “God has given us two hands: one hand for receiving and the other for giving”. I think there’s something quite profound in that metaphor. As we receive from God, so we are to give to others - whether that is meeting their material needs, as at Harvest or whether that is meeting their spiritual needs, by sharing the Gospel with them.

We receive from God all the blessings he has to give us in terms of providing our daily bread, in terms of grace and mercy and forgiveness and hospitality and love. And so we are to share all those blessings with others in equal measure.

I hope that this Harvest will be a metaphor for everything that St. Andrew’s will increasingly become in the future: a church that receives plenteously from God and is willing to share that hospitality with others in equal measure.

A church that mirrors the hospitality of God in word and deed.