**Harvest Festival 2015**

**Romans 8:18-27**

Some people argue that holding a Harvest Festival service is an outdated thing for the church to do, particularly in a city context, because we no longer have that intimate relationship between the means of production of our food and its consumption. When was the last time any of us ploughed a field and scattered the good seed on the ground? When was the last time any of us welcomed the harvest home and gathered in our produce into our barns? We do not have an intimate relationship with our means of production and we exist pretty much as consumers only so, for some, Harvest Festival has become a meaningless tradition.

I don’t agree. I think that it is a Festival at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

It is an opportunity for us to think about our social responsibility to those who do not have access to food like we do. I talk about that a lot, actually, and won’t be focusing on that this morning. It’s also an opportunity for us to think about God’s provision and God’s grace to us - and I will touch briefly on that this morning. But more than that, and what I do want to think about today, is the fact that there is something intensely spiritual about Harvest Festival because it is a celebration of God’s creation and there is something intensely spiritual about God’s creation.

By celebrating Harvest Festival, we are tapping into something very profound about the Christian faith and the innate spirituality of life itself. Let me explain that in relation to the reading we heard from Paul’s letter to the Romans. But first, something about food produce itself, whether that is a fruit or a vegetable or some other natural component of our food…

Let’s take this carrot as an example: just a simple, humble carrot…But there is both a complexity and a simplicity about this carrot that helps us to reflect on our own spirituality and our own relationship with God.

Any scientist would tell us that the biological make-up of a carrot is incredibly complex. I won’t bore you with the detail – you can Google it like I did and read about the chemical makeup of a carrot including moisture, protein, fat, carbohydrate, crude fibre, zinc, carotenes, thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, Vitamin C, cellulose, lignin and a whole lot more. But more than just the biological make-up, there is a complexity about a carrot because it contains within it the wind, the rain, the sun, the breath of 10,000 people, the air of all the continents.

It is true to say that the whole universe is contained within a single carrot: it is so complex.

And yet it is so simple too. A carrot is so simple even a child can appreciate it. There is no need for explanation with a carrot. We look at a carrot and we love it in its simplicity.

And I think the same is true of people too. We are so complex; not just biologically and physiologically but in terms of our psychology too. Just as a carrot contains a universe within itself, so we contain within us the sum total of all our experiences, all those relationships that have made us what we are. And yet we are so simple too. We are called to love one another, not necessarily to analyse one another. Each one of is called to love who we see in front of us in all their simplicity and complexity.

So as we look around us at the Harvest produce today, we see a symbolic representation of who we are as community. Complex individuals, complex creations - and yet, just as we look at the simplicity of a carrot and fall in love with it, so we are called to look at one another and love one another.

But as true as all that is, Harvest Festival offers us more than just a lesson in the philosophical paradox of complexity and simplicity. There is a sense in which Harvest Festival draws us into the story of salvation itself. The story of how God is in the process of redeeming the world and drawing the whole of creation back to himself - and that is where we reflect on the reading we heard from Paul’s letter to the Romans.

What strikes me first about this passage is the idea of a corporate groaning that is at the very heart of what Paul is trying to tell us. In verse 22 he writes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.” In verse 23 he writes, “And not only the creation, but we ourselves…groan inwardly while we wait for the redemption of our bodies.” And then in verse 26, using a different word but conveying the same idea, Paul writes, “[The] Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” Bringing these three verses together, there is a cosmic sighing and groaning that goes on involving God, human beings and creation itself.

At our Harvest Festival, we have a visual and actual representation of God, human beings and creation brought together in one place, groaning together.

But what is this groaning all about? What does Paul mean by this?

Paul is arguing in this part of his letter to the Romans that salvation isn’t just God’s gift to human beings but that, actually, salvation is for the whole of God’s created order. As John wrote in his Gospel, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son Jesus Christ…” The world is the recipient of God’s act of salvation - not just human beings - and that is what Paul is stressing in this passage.

But in what sense does creation need to be saved?

In verse 20, Paul draws us back to the beginning of the Biblical story, in Genesis: “The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it…” Paul is referring here to the sin of Adam. Adam had been given dominion over all creation in Genesis 1:28 but in Genesis 3, we read how Adam and Eve fell from grace and how their sin brought a rupture between the Creator God and his Creation. Creation itself had not sinned but the sin of Adam had the consequence of disrupting the perfection of creation. As God says to Adam in Genesis 3:17: “Cursed is the ground because of you.” Because of you – not through any fault of creation itself - and that is what Paul is re-iterating in Romans 8:20 when he says: “The creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it…” Adam is the one who subjected creation to futility.

What does Paul mean by saying that creation is futile?

The word he uses refers to the idea of not being able to achieve what it is supposed to do or an object that is not able to function as it was designed to do. There are two ways in which creation has become futile as a result of Adam’s sin.

First, it has become futile because its original, pure function was simply to glorify the Creator God but humanity has decided that nature should, instead, be used by us for our own ends: essentially, to use and abuse as we see fit. So in our mismanagement of the earth’s resources, we make creation futile. In our polluting activity, we make creation futile. In our greed and the way in which we hoard creation’s riches for luxurious living whilst others die, we make creation futile.

Creation was created to glorify God. But through mismanagement, pollution and greed, we dishonour God and therefore make creation futile.

Secondly, we make creation futile when we worship creation itself. Creation was created to point to the Creator God, to bring glory to God. But when we treat the created order as if it were God itself, we make creation futile. Some may argue that there are elements and individuals within the world of the sciences that treat creation as it were God itself. There are also other faiths that do worship the created order. Both of these approaches make creation futile: it was created so that we may draw closer to the Creator God.

And in the same way that a broken toy needs mending when a child breaks it, so the created order needs saving because humanity has made it futile. And Paul speaks of the hope of that event in verse 21: “The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

So first, as we look around us at these beautiful Harvest gifts today, we remember our corporate guilt as human beings that, in reality, we have made creation futile. These gifts, which will be passed on to those who are in desperate need for the basics of living actually shout out to us about the consequence of our sin: that which was created to glorify God has been made futile by our mismanagement, pollution and greed. These displays are a living testimony to us of the groaning of creation that needs redemption.

But there is a flip-side to this coin - and the flip-side is this: These gifts have been brought into church and now accompany us in worship and are actually inspiring us, at this very moment to reflect more deeply on the message of salvation and the glory of the Creator God. So the bringing of these Harvest gifts into the presence of God and his church, and using them to glorify God, is actually an act of redemption and salvation in and of itself. This food produce is no longer futile: these products are being used for the very purpose they were created for, which is to glorify God.

And this brings us to the second key word in Paul’s passage here, which is ‘hope’. Three times, Paul has mentioned the idea of ‘groaning’ - but five times, he mentions the idea of hope. And with Paul’s use of the word ‘hope’ comes a sense of our responsibility towards the salvation of creation.

In verse 24 he writes, “In hope, we were saved”. And in that one phrase he sums up the reality of the Christian experience and the experience of the whole of creation. Our salvation is secure through Jesus’ death on the cross. But we still live in hope because the full reality and the full experience of our salvation is yet to be revealed. We live in a ‘between-times’ experience: our salvation is secure but not fully enjoyed, evil has been defeated but there is still evil in the world, sin has been overcome but sinfulness still wreaks havoc on creation, the power of death has been vanquished but we all still experience death.

We are the ‘inbetweeners’: living in the reality of salvation – but still waiting for it to be fully revealed. And so, as Paul says in verse 19, we wait with the rest of creation with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.

The question is, what will we do in the waiting time? Will we continue to engage in futility or will we live out the salvation that is already our inheritance and our promise?

And part of what it means for us to live out our salvation is in relation to how we relate to God’s created order. We no longer want to dishonour God by keeping his creation in futility. We want to exercise our dominion over creation with respect and foresight. We want to abstain from acts that pollute and harm. We want to avoid hoarding the riches of creation and learn to share with equity. Part of what it means to live out our salvation is to live in harmony with God’s creation in such a way that he is glorified. That, in itself, is an act of redemption.

So this morning, we are surrounded by Harvest gifts. But Harvest Festival is more than just a nice occasion. There is something very deep and intensely spiritual go on here today - 3 things:

First, we are reminded of the complexity and simplicity of the created order and as we appreciate the simplicity of a carrot, so we are reminded that we are to love each other in all our simplicity and complexity.

Second, we are reminded of our sinfulness and how our participation in sin continues to perpetuate the futility of creation through our mismanagement, pollution and greed and that creation, and humans, and God, groan in anticipation of redemption.

Third, we are reminded of the responsibility we share to live out our salvation responsibly as we hope for and wait for the consummation of our redemption.

Redemption is a lived experience and we must choose to live out our redemption and the redemption of the created order.

So I say, “Thank God for Harvest Festival” and thank God for the message of salvation that it helps us to reflect on. Most of all, I say, “Thank God for the God who saves” and as we wait in patience for our salvation to be revealed, we seek to glorify God in all we do and in how we live.