**Cranmer Group Sermon**

**4th October 2020 – Harvest Festival**

**The Generosity of God**

**(Matthew 7:7-12)**

It doesn’t take a genius to point out that not many of us are going to look back in years to come and say to ourselves, “2020 – *that* was a great year!”

This last nine months have, for us as a nation – indeed, as a global community - *and*, *I’m only too aware*, for many of *us* as individuals, been the hardest and most challenging for decades. Not since the Second World War have we been confronted by such a universally common enemy, but, this time around, the coronavirus that confronts us all is a hidden and deadly opponent, in so many ways far more complex and difficult to combat than a military foe, with its vast socio-economic impact on us as well – on businesses and employees, on schoolchildren and students, on families and friends.

And with all of this as a backdrop, in village communities such as ours – thanks to the awful floods of last winter, and the incredibly dry spell at the start of Lockdown – we have just brought in what in many parts of the UK is the worst grain harvest in a generation. It doesn’t seem a great place to start, as we come together this [morning] [afternoon], to thank God for his bounty; for all of His goodness to each one of us, encapsulated in this time of harvest.

What sense are we to make of all of this? Where is God in all of it? How are we even *able* to talk of the generosity of God of the harvest, in this extraordinarily difficult environment?

All of these are more than justifiable questions to ask at a time like this. Indeed we see exactly this sort of exasperation; bemusement; anger, even, throughout many of the 150 Psalms in the Bible’s Old Testament. At times, the Psalms’ authors certainly don’t hold back: “How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself for ever?” “You put me in the lowest pit; in the darkest depths.” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

As a central part of God-inspired Scripture, that have guided Christians through times of darkness and pain for centuries, the Psalms show us in language like this, that it’s OK to “Have a go at our Heavenly Father”; to be honest with God about the place we find ourselves in, because it is precisely *there*, in our current reality, that he meets us.

But our Bible reading today, from the last part of what’s often referred to as Christ’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’ in St. Matthew’s Gospel, offers us a slightly *different* perspective. Yes, God absolutely invites us to come to him as we are, whether that’s in a good place, or whether we’re at a point in life that’s just really, really hard right now. Or maybe our lives are ‘somewhere in the middle’ – neither great, nor awful. But Jesus *reassures* us in this passage about who God *always* is, and about how he *always* responds to us when we turn to him, no matter what state *we* may be in at this time. Let’s look together at what Jesus says…

First of all, it’s important that we put Jesus’s words here in context. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus sets out his ‘manifesto’, if you like - his set of revolutionary statements about the person of God; about the principles that define the *Kingdom* of God; and about how he - Jesus - invites each one of us to *respond* to God’s invitation to us, to live following His ways, in intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father. These three chapters are where Jesus challenges us to “love our enemies”; to “go the extra mile”; to “store up treasures in heaven”, and not on earth; and to pray to Our Father in the words of the Lord’s Prayer. These are radical words, but they *also* get right to the *heart* of God’s ‘Kingdom Vision’, for our lives; right to the heart of the extraordinary gifts that God offers to each and every one of us.

Every harvest time, we of course gather - as closely as we’re allowed this year, admittedly! – to rejoice in, and give thanks for, all that God has given us in terms of physical provision; the crops that the farmers amongst us have just, in the words of our hymn, “safely gathered in”. But our reading encourages us to consider more broadly – and profoundly – than just that.

It invites us to come into the presence of God, in a position of prayer, with whatever is most deeply on our hearts; the things in our lives where we say, “God, please help me; I just don’t know what to do about this situation in my life; I really need you to intervene for me, please.” The sort of thing, perhaps, of which we’ve all had a great deal this last year…

Jesus invites us to come into God’s presence three times, in three slightly different ways: “ask”; “seek”; “knock”. Jesus invites us to speak with God; to pray.

I suggest that there are three key *encouragements* that Jesus then gives us about how God responds, when we come before him in this way.

First of all, if we pray, God makes promises to us. There are three invitations – ask; seek; knock – but there are seven promises in return. We are to expect good things – *only* good things - from God, since this is the *nature* of his character. Verses 7–8: “Ask, and [1] it *will be given* to you; seek, and [2] *you will find*; knock, and [3] it *will be opened to you*. For everyone who asks [4] *receives*, and the one who seeks [5] *finds*, and to the one who knocks [6] *it will be opened*.” Then at the end of verse 11, [7]: “How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Jesus tells us that we can have a robust confidence in God’s willingness to give his people all that they need – not necessarily all that we may *want*, mind you, but all the “good things” that we need.

Second, be encouraged that everyone who asks, receives. For those who’ve asked Christ into their life, and follow him, then Jesus gives them the encouragement (the assurance, in fact!) that, *“…everyone* who asks receives; and the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, it will be opened.” God isn’t in the business of letting down those who make the choice to follow Jesus Christ.

And, thirdly, be encouraged that we can trust God’s goodness, because he’s *already* made us his children, alongside Jesus himself. In the words of St. John’s Gospel, chapter 1, “To all who did receive him [Jesus, that is]; to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

Here’s another implicit encouragement to pray: God will give us good things *as* his children, because he’s *already* given us the gift to *become* his children. We have the opportunity, believing in him, to stand before him *alongside* his only son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus continues, using outlandish images to show his listeners just how good the gifts are, which he gives to those who follow him. He uses dramatic effect, describing his listeners as being “evil”, in contrast to the perfection of God. But basically he’s saying that, even for all of you listening to me now, even though you – just like me! - are *so* far short of the way of living to which God calls us all; when we prayerfully ask our Heavenly Father for something, then He will respond. There’s no way in which human fathers - or mothers - like you would give their children a stone when they ask for bread, or a snake then they ask for a fish - we’ll do our utmost for our children; I know I certainly would for Esther. So, if God is so infinitely better than humanity, imagine HOW MUCH MORE He’ll lavish his gifts on us.

[Hold up can of Coke]

I imagine that at least a decent number of you will be able to cast your minds back to the world of TV and cinema advertising in the 70s and 80s. If so, I’m sure you’d be able to tell me what for many years, the main advertising slogan for this – a can of Coke was. “Coca Cola – it’s the Real Thing.” Well, the Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon said this of God, that “Our Lord will give us the Real Thing.” Never the scorpion or the snake; always the bread or the fish.

Bread and fish – the traditional diet of the people of Galilee in the time of Jesus, but also the crucial elements of perhaps the most famous of all of Jesus’s miracles: the feeding of the 5,000.

I’m sure that the resonance between Jesus’s words in our lesson, and that miracle of super-abundance, isn’t coincidental. When Jesus tells us that our Heavenly Father will respond to us with bread and with fish, just as we have requested – and not the unthinkable response of the stone or snake – then he’s creating a link for us with that extraordinary multiplication – our God is the God whose abundance and generosity knows no bounds, towards those who love Him. The God who, in St. Paul’s words from Ephesians 3, “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” gives us these 3 assurances: it *will* be given to you; you *will* find; the door *will* be opened to you.

Even in this dreadful year, God is still with us, in the person of Jesus Christ, though the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God still provides – not necessarily all that we might want, but all that each of us *needs*. And, in this regard, God calls each one of us to do two things, which we do in our service today.

First of all, to come before Him in praise and thanksgiving, for all that, in his extraordinary generosity, he has given to each one of us – the provision for everyday life; the bounty of the harvest and all the gifts with which He blesses us; but, above all, the gift of His son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, through whom we can be reconciled with our Heavenly Father once again.

And, secondly, as it says at the end of our reading, that *we* would do as *we* would have others do to *us;* that *we* will share all that the Father has done for us in the person of Jesus Christ with those whom we encounter throughout our lives, that they too might know his Gospel; his Good News; sharing the gifts which God bestows on us, especially with those less fortunate than ourselves. Lord, I pray that you will move in our hearts today, that we will do precisely this.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.