

Sermon, 3 October, 2021, Suffolk: Harvest Festival (Trinity 19, Year of Mark)

Gospel: Mark 10.2-16

I am Patrick and my day-job is as chaplain. I have been living in the area since February, but today is my first chance to be with you, in role, as priest. Because the times have been so strange. Even stranger is I will only be saying my final farewell to my former parish... at the end of this new month. (When I physically left, the services were virtual, not in-person.)

That former parish was in London, in East London, and before that I had spent time in North, West and South London. I am not a Londoner – I am a Yorkshireman (I was going to say “a proud Yorkshireman, but in truth there is no other sort) – but it is fair to say that I know London.<sup>[1]</sup> And I know London churches. And I know this about London churches: in London churches, by and large, Harvest is not a big thing.

It may not be hard to think about why this is. Londoners have little to do with farmers. Londoners tend not to see fields being harvested. They may not know one end of a combine harvester from another. And Londoners don't see trawlers, or cows heading off to milking, either. For Londoners, then, food is something you buy at the shop, and the whole back-story is, well, hidden. It follows that the very idea of “harvest”, of a harvest, of harvest-time, does not arise as a natural theme.

I've long pondered what kind of loss this might be. Is it a small loss? After all, given modern farming and distribution techniques, there really isn't one harvest time, like there used to be. Or is this a large loss, meaning that Londoners are cut off from sympathy with the real-life lives of those who (in different ways) suffer to bring them their foods? I think there is a potent question here.

Here! We are here. And here harvest is taken seriously. And here, now, am I. And in that I (I don't say you) rejoice. Here, then, we can honour our farmers, and vets, and (yes) lorry drivers, and (yes) abattoir workers, and allied workers, and their families. Here too we honour the natural cycle, the seasons, growth itself. Here too we give thanks that we have what we need to live. We have sustenance. We have enough. We have enough – for our bodies. We might even give thanks for our bodies.

I wonder if we do. I wonder if we do give thanks for our bodies. I am not asking if we admire our bodies, if we think ours are so much better than others. Most of us do not admire our bodies, compared to others. There is something to think through and talk about right there, to be sure. But here and now I am asking if we give thanks that we have bodies. No, that's not well put. I am asking if we give thanks that we *are* bodies. We are our bodies. Strange as it may seem, that is the Christian way of thinking about things.

In today's Gospel, Jesus goes right back to the beginning, to the story of creation. (By the way, it is not only Jesus. Throughout the world, yesterday, by happy coincidence our Jewish brothers and sisters also went back to the beginning, starting again their own cycle of readings, hearing again of creation.) “God made them male and female.”

Let me give you the Hebrew. This is Genesis 1.27:

וַיְבָרֵא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ, בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, בָּרָא אֹתָם.

And Gd created the human being in Gd's image. In the image of Gd Gd created them. Male and female Gd created them.

In giving you the Hebrew, I am not showing off. (My Hebrew is nothing like as good as it used to be, as I'd like it to be.) I am quoting the Hebrew, because within it there is a point that is lost in translation. It is the word (the very word) for the human being, for humankind. It is *adam*. *Adam* is not just the name for one male person. It is the word for a human being in general, for humankind.

You will have known that (I think), but there is this: the word *adam* relates to the word *adamah*. Indeed, the word *adamah* is the grammatically feminine version of the grammatically masculine *adam*. And *adamah* is the word for the ground, for the earth. The human being is made out of the earth. Which is better in Hebrew: *adam* is made from *adamah*. This closeness leads some translators to translate *adam* as "earthling", even as "groundling". I think that makes sense.

So, you see, brothers and sisters, we are groundlings. Even people in London are groundlings. We are all people of the ground, of the earth. Our connection with what we harvest is close, is as close as that.

People outside the Church – and sometimes inside the Church - think that Christianity is concerned firstly or only with a thing called the soul. It is all about the soul, and about how the soul can make it into heaven. Which also means how the soul can escape the body. It isn't. That is not Christianity. It's another faith, another gospel altogether. It's true we might speak of soul and body. But the soul isn't the real bit of you, somehow encased in a body. It would be truer to say that the soul is what makes the body you – *and* the body is what makes the soul you. The two are as closely related as that. Gd made you a groundling. Gd saves you as groundling. Gd loves you as groundling.

It's true to say that we groundlings have made a mess – a disaster – of the ground we are so related to. Surely we need to pray for the COP26 meeting which is imminent. We need to reflect on our own habits, and those of wider society. We need change. We need to change as groundlings.

As we celebrate harvest, giving thanks that we have what we need, let us also celebrate ourselves as Gd's good groundlings, called to care for the ground. In Gd's image, we are called to reflect Gd's love, Gd's love even for the ground, which too was brought into being by Gd creating, by Gd's Yes.

You too were brought into being by Gd's Yes. (I too was brought into being by Gd's Yes. Even Londoners were brought into being by Gd's Yes.) May you harvest the love of Gd, both hidden and revealed, both revealed and hidden, in your life as groundling. Amen.

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[1] References to London and Londoners in this service are said both with a twinkle in my eye and a tongue in my cheek. I was actually back in London within the last week, and loved both place and people. So comments and judgements here are for comedic effect, Naturally, it is also the case that how Londoners do and do not mark harvest can be a serious subject for much reflection.