



AFC 281
Psalm 1
Matthew 7.12-20
27th September 2020

Harvest 2020

HARVEST INTRO: The week before

Next Sunday, 27th September 2020, we'll be celebrating our Harvest Festival.

Once again, we'll hear the Harvest hymns and offer to God our prayers of thanks. And once again we'll have the opportunity to make a special offering, on top of our usual giving.

This year's Harvest Mission Offering will be split between two charities.

The first works overseas and it is Operation Agri. Their Harvest Appeal for 2020 is called Trees for Tanzania. The money we raise will help set up tree nurseries as well as helping to establish village community banks and provide fuel saving stoves.

Operation Agri, an organisation with a Baptist foundation, is working with the Anglican Church in Tanzania to do this and it is called the *Imarika Project* – an African word which means '*to strengthen*'.

The second charity is closer to home. It's the New Hope Trust based in Watford.

New Hope was set up in 1990 by two ladies who called themselves a couple of 'ordinary housewives'. They purchased two old coaches and turned them into Soup Kitchens that helped feed homeless people.

Today, New Hope has an operating budget of just over £2m a year, employs 60 people and has 160 volunteers. Its aim is to prevent homelessness.

It runs a night shelter than runs from 1st Dec to 31st March and operates 9 houses. Homeless people who stay in these houses all have a key worker so that, together, they may make a journey from dependent to independent living. Last year 271 people stayed in one of New Hopes houses and went through their programme.

So, Harvest Sunday is a day for us to give thanks, it's also an opportunity for us to give money to these two wonderful projects. We can do that using the pink mission envelopes in your offering pack, if you have one. Or placing money in the basket clearly marked HARVEST OFFERING when coming into church on the 27th September. Or you could send a cheque to Bob, our treasurer.

Along with that, New Hope, are happy to receive the produce of our Harvest Display. A list of what they need is on the website. We can bring these gifts to church on either the Sunday 20th or 27th and leave them in the basket by the Sanctuary doors.

So, conscious of our many blessings, let's use Harvest to bless others.

TALK: **Lessons from Trees**

The one time Poet Laureate, John Betjeman, in his Metroland verses was fond of calling our county Leafy Bucks.

Amersham is full of trees and indeed at this time of year the ones outside our church remind us of their presence by dropping their canopy. Harvest Festival time co-indices with a lot of leaf clearing.

So, on this Sunday when we specifically look to the creation and our creator for inspiration what lessons might we learn from the trees?

Well, they grow towards the light. It's called Phototropism, a word I've been practising all week and one that comes from the Greek of phos, meaning light and tropos meaning turning. Turning towards the light.

Walk through any copse or forest and there's a struggle going on. As a shoot emerges through the undergrowth it will be searching for the light.

The metaphor of light and Jesus describing himself as the 'light of the world' is central to Christianity. It's surely a very positive concept; that of living life honestly, out in the open, following a path not of shadows but illumination.

Like trees we are people who want our lives to face the light and be nurtured and sustained by it.

We also need to learn a lesson or two from them about putting down roots.

The Psalmists often took their cue from nature and indeed the Psalter begins with Psalm One's description of a follower of God being like a tree planted by streams of living water. Trees with deep roots grow tall.

Both our Jewish cousins and ourselves have a great love for the scriptures. We view these stories, poems, letters and prayers that make up the bible as deep wells of truth. We want to put our roots into such wisdom.

In ancient synagogue worship the scriptures were usually written onto scrolls, and these were wrapped round a pole with a handle at the top and bottom made of wood. These wooden handles were traditionally called the 'Etz Hayim', the Tree of Life handles because either side of them they contained the Word of God.

Putting our roots down in scripture helps us and gives us a life giving foundation.

And, of course, as we think of trees, we want to be like the ones that produce good fruit.

In today's gospel reading we were told that we'll be known for our fruit.

We can't say one thing and live another. It's hypocrisy to act one way in church and another at home or work.

Nothing has thrilled me more over these last six months than seeing members of our congregation put their faith into practise. Although much of the time we have been separated and socially distanced there has been so much 'coming together': phone calls, emails, zooming and WhatsApp. Some have told me it's only been since March that they have got to know people better.

That's fruit, and the bearing of fruit. Rising to fresh challenges in a spirit of love and generosity and finding something of Christ in a crisis.

And lastly, trees are generally in it for the long term.

Just think of that Yew tree in St John's churchyard in Tisbury, Wiltshire, probably Britain's oldest living tree, carbon dated now and known to be 4,000 years old. If only it could talk!

Faith in God and being a follower of Jesus often means taking the long view and living by deep, unchanging truths. Such a view struggles against those narcissistic tendencies we all have. Life can never just be about me. Living in community means living together, carrying each other's burdens, looking out for the weakest as we walk together at the speed of love.

Such faith learns to live with patience, and it takes the long view.

This harvest time – why not look at the trees and let them, for a moment or two, become our teachers.

ECO MATTERS

In recent times the worldwide Church has observed this time of year as Creation Season. So, between 1st September to 4th October – which conveniently includes the Harvest Festival for most congregations, Christians across the planet have been focussing on our relationship with the natural order.

We are in changing times and one of the biggest transitions is our energy production and consumption. Ten years ago, 3% of the UK's energy came from renewable sources such as solar, wind and hydroelectricity. Today

we have the largest offshore wind industry in the world.

During Lockdown, in one of the sunniest Springs on record, our national electricity demand plummeted and for two months we generated all that was needed without using any of the fossil burning power stations.

Scientists are telling us we have just over a decade left to reduce our carbon emissions and reduce global warming to 1.5degrees.

Churches are taking up that challenge and part of that response has been the Eco Church project.

We have signed up for that here at AFC – the first congregation to be validated by Eco Church was St Paul’s Cathedral – so we are in good company.

We voted to join Eco Church at a congregational meeting earlier this year, we’ve already done their survey which tells us how we are doing ecologically. The survey asks questions such as: do we mention the environment in worship? Are our buildings insulated, using LED bulbs, have good rainwater collection and church grounds open to wildlife?

One of the really big steps we have taken as a congregation this year – and with the encouragement of both The United Reformed Church and Eco Church is to switch our electricity to a green account.

This is all an ongoing process seeking to blend ecology and theology in our church life.

To that end it’s great to see that the Baptist Union launched, on the 6th September, a new organisation: The Baptist Union Environmental Network, partly headed up by a neighbour of ours, The Revd Dave Gregory, minister of Croxley Green Baptist Church – a scientist minister.

All of these initiatives are calling us to both rejoice in creation and strive to be good stewards of a good earth.