



**A Sermon by the Succentor, The Reverend Philippa White on
19 November 2017**

Do you depend on God? And who depends on you?

(Deuteronomy 8: 7-13, 2 Corinthians 9: 6-end, Luke 12: 16-30)

+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Salvation.

On Tuesday this week, I celebrated harvest with the 450 children from Ermine Primary Academy. They all squashed into church and sang their songs – the classic Autumn Days, the ubiquitous Harvest Samba (I don't think we'll be seeing that on the music list any time soon!) and something about broad beans sleeping in a blankety bed. And they brought their harvest gifts. They had brought so much, in fact, that they couldn't bring it all to church – it filled the whole school office and we had to go and collect it later!

It was a record year for harvest gifts from Ermine Primary. And I don't think it was because school families are more generous this year, or because school families have suddenly become wealthier (that clearly isn't the case.) I think it's because this year, the harvest gifts are just going next door – to the branch of the Community Larder which we've set up in the church hall. The harvest gifts they bring are going to their neighbours; their aunties and granddads; children they play with in the park and sit next to in assembly.

Last year, the tins of tuna and boxes of cereal were going to the central Community Larder. They might have fed anyone in the city. But this year, they were staying on the Ermine – within the community. And that means people gave more.

People gave more because there is something important about community. Of course we are called to care about those far away – but it isn't wrong that we find it much easier to care for those who are near. At its best, community means that we are willing to depend on each other and take on responsibility for each other – willing to give from our resources to support our neighbours.

This theme of mutual dependence has always been at the heart of harvest and it's at the heart of our readings too: in Deuteronomy, in Corinthians and in Luke. In Deuteronomy, the Israelites stand at the threshold of something new: they are on the point of moving from their wilderness wanderings, in which God had fed them day by day with manna and all they had had to do was to pick it up, into an agricultural economy. In the wilderness, your family was self-sufficient so long as you all depended on God. In Israel, you would need to depend on each other. God promised a rich and fertile land – but a land that needed cultivating, and a series of crops that couldn't stand alone. If you were a vinegrower, you couldn't live on your crop alone – though you might enjoy trying. If you grew wheat or barley, you probably could – but if you swapped your barley for your neighbour's olives and your other neighbour's pomegranates, you would have a feast. And if you were a copper miner in the hills, good luck with living on the products of your work – but your copper would make excellent tools for farming and cooking.

So the good land God had in store for the Israelites was a land where they would have to live in community: where, having learnt in the wilderness to rely on God, they would learn to rely on each other as well. Harvest, in this context, is a celebration not only of God's goodness in giving them the rich and fertile land, but also of their community's work together to cultivate it. And thanking God for the harvest also means sharing its products with one another.

But community sufficiency relies on unselfishness – and Jesus points out that selfishness is always a danger. The more we have, the more likely we are to want to hoard it – to think that plenty of food, or savings, or possessions, is the same thing as security. Jesus tells us it isn't. Jesus tells us that worrying about what we have, or wish we had, is the opposite of the dependence on God and on one another which is the plan God has for us all. That's what the rich man in Jesus' parable had got wrong – he thought that everything he had was for him to hoard. When he asked himself "what shall I do, for I have no place to store my crops" the answer should have been "give them to people whose land hasn't been so successful this year." Giving thanks to God for the gifts God had given him and recognising that God's gifts are given to share, not to hoard. That's the attitude Jesus describes as being "rich towards God."

And in just the same way, Paul tells the church in Corinth that they should give generously to the church in Jerusalem (who, having left the structures of Judaism, had found themselves ostracised and in need) – because the church in Jerusalem was part of the same community as the church in Corinth. They were all one community – in which the rich should support the poor, even across a distance of 1890 miles – a community which depended on each other.

That redefinition of community is important. Not just the people within three square miles of us; not just people in our own country; and, going further than Paul, not just people of the same religion. We are called to recognise that we are part of the community of the whole of creation. That the gifts God gives to us are equipping us to take our place in the whole created order – dependent on God and therefore dependent on the land and on other people. In a food economy that is globalised – where our cabbages come from Spain, not Lincolnshire – that redefinition of community means we recognise that we depend on farmers in Spain, in Argentina, even in Israel – and that therefore, people from just as far away depend on us for help as well.

We depend on God, but we also depend on each other. Or rather, because we depend on God we depend on each other. We give thanks to God for the harvest, and we give thanks by giving away as much as we can afford. It's like the joke about the man trying to escape a flood (you all know it, right?) He climbed up on his roof and prayed for help. A boat comes past and says "jump in!" No – I've prayed for help, God will save me! Another boat comes. Another no. A helicopter hovers overhead and sends a rope ladder down. No, God's going to save me! Well – he drowns. And in heaven he stomps up to God. Why didn't you save me, God? I prayed! I trusted you!

You all know what God says. I sent you two boats and a helicopter – what more do you want?

We depend on each other – because we depend on God. It's our responsibility to exist in community: knowing that since everything is already under God's control, we don't need

to hoard. We can give what we have away. We can safely share the good things that God gives us. And if we don't, giving thanks to God for the harvest is incomplete.

At Ermine Primary's harvest festival, I gave them a packet of jammy dodgers and talked about jammy dodgers being a microcosm of all the good things God gives us – the fruits of the earth and the work of human hands. But the most important lesson from the jammy dodgers was that they come in packets – and packets of biscuits are for sharing. Our harvest thanksgiving is to realise that God's good gifts are to the whole community – the whole of creation. Those given to us are given to share.