Sermon to mark Harvest Thanksgiving and the completion of work in St Nahi’s Church Dundrum Diocese of Dublin October 8th 2023, The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity Readings: 2 Corinthians 9.6-12; St John 4.31-38

St John 4.35: *But look, I tell you, look around at the fields: they are already white, ripe for harvesting.*

St JOHN CHAPTER 4 AND WHAT WE EXPECT

When we hear that there is going to be a reading from St John chapter 4, our mind races towards The Meeting of Jesus with the Samaritan Woman at the Well. This is one of the most beautifully presented invitations to active discipleship in the whole of The New Testament. There is honest and feisty interchange between two adults, one a female and one a male. There are genuine moments of insight and understanding on both sides. There is the release into the wild, so to speak, of the person who for evermore will be called The Samaritan Woman as a new woman full of Christ-given confidence in how she handles herself and other people. She goes back into her community to tell Good News to the very people who despised and rejected her for her lifestyle – and she shows no bitterness, even forgetting the water jar which had brought her, as a social outcast, to the well at high noon in the first place to fetch that most basic of commodities: water. How, or why, could we forget this story?

… BUT READ ON …

Today we are encouraged to read on from the point where she says: *Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?* We go directly into the later part of this story which is all about harvesting. We find that the theme of harvest takes up the very same message of hope and of joy as did the story of her discipleship. Harvesting is about fields but it is also about hearts. And the focus has become more urgent than ever it was because the future is more urgent than the past is. We are encouraged to think of the harvest as a thing not of the past but of the future; we are to focus on the harvest of potential and of opportunity. And my straightforward suggestion is that we need more of this in our church life and, to help us to get there, we need to find this hope and this joy in the life beyond the church, outside the church, and bring it into church as a harvest which we have gathered and which we can celebrate.

It is clear that at one time St John 4.31-38 was widely read. In it we find two pithy phrases that have stuck and are in everyday use:

*… it is meat and drink (to me) …* and *… one sows, another reaps …*

Clearly both of these phrases were *music to the ears* of those who heard them. They must have used them again and again; they slipped into easy, popular conversation where they still hold their place because people generally at one time either read their Bible or heard the Bible read. Those days are long gone but the phrases live on. What is *meat and drink* to Jesus is to do the work of his Father. What happens under the providence, the overarching guidance, of God when one sows, another reaps is that both the sower *and* the reaper rejoice at the same time. The timeframe of God is offered to all God’s creation because both come together through the agency of a shared and living inheritance. One sows, another reaps. There could be friction but the key point is that there isn’t, there is no animosity regarding who in the fulness of time reaps the dividend. It is a shared activity with a shared output. We are told that they rejoice together. The sowing may indeed happen in one lifetime, the reaping in another lifetime. They both happen in the timeframe of God who is the giver of life itself and the giver of time to us. At any and every given time, we are encouraged to see that already the fields are white, ripe for harvesting. The heavy lifting, the hard graft has already been done by God. We are invited to harvest, share and enjoy.

WHY ARE WE HERE TODAY?

We gather together in St Nahi’s Church today to give thanks to God for work completed on this historic church which, with its still visible circular enclosure between here and the lower road, takes us back into The Middle Ages of our Christian heritage. For my own part, I love coming here and am always honoured to be invited by successive rectors, and today is no exception. Week by week, we reap where others sowed and we also sow afresh for future generation in their turn to reap again at another time. This is what worship is, this is what liturgy does. Work such as this is essential for the wellbeing of any building and for its inhabitants. In some ways, a church is no different from any other building. And yet, in many ways, it is radically different because it is particularly special and dear to the community of hope, to the body of Christ and to the individual pilgrim soul. It is the place to which generations of people come in faith, in hope and in love for occasions sad and sorrowful, joyous and uplifting – and they do this on a regular basis – and sometimes they are able to move from one way of being to a different way of being, because God is in the place where they are and God comes to meet them face to face in good ways. Beauty and quietness are two ways in which this often happens, as restoration and healing take their course.

We are here to recognize and to honour something very specific to St Nahi’s and to Christ Church, Taney, that is the depth of loyalty which makes possible a depth of responsibility and both have made possible a depth of generosity. These are the factors that have made today’s gathering before God in celebration possible and that will make it so fruitful. I want to thank and to congratulate rector and parishioners and everyone associated with the life and witness of this church for everything you have done and particularly for your perseverance through the times of Covid-19. In those days, our anxieties about the life of the church were such that we were quite unsure what would happen after Covid-19. Now we are here in church this morning marking and celebrating significant work completed, significant generosity shared and a significant harvest of service of God and neighbour and service of the community of Dundrum that lies ahead of us. This is testimony to your spirit of resilience. I want to encourage you to keep this up and to keep this going, to keep *reaping where you and others have sown*. Stand back and look at what you have achieved; stand back and look at what you have built – and keep achieving and keep building. You have shown that you can do it. I want you to continue and to keep going. I have every confidence that you can and that you will – together.

WHERE NEXT? HARVESTING THE FUTURE

Today is a day of thanksgiving and of celebration. Today is a day of building and of sharing. Today is a day of harvesting and of plenty. Once again, my thanks go to you all for your generosity and for your focus on the future and for your instinct for harvest. Many of us were taught from our earliest years that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The Lockdowns taught us that there is another way of looking at this piece of wisdom: it is, in all circumstances, just as blessed to receive as it is to give. Let us sow and reap in goodness, in grace and in generosity. Our First Reading from 2 Corinthians points us in this direction. Sow as you would like to reap; sow as you would like others to reap as make it like what you yourself would like to reap – bountiful, overflowing, happy, fruitful. And, perhaps not surprisingly we now hear another well-polished phrase: *God loves a cheerful giver.* Abundance is the language of God and abundance is the language of God’s people. It is most of all distribution that is our calling and our responsibility. The growth is a mystery of God and of nature. It is into a world of distribution that we step joyfully and bountifully – yet chastened by the ravages of inequality and climate changes brought about by our own longing for excess - from this beautifully restored church once we finish today’s Harvest Thanksgiving. We have work to do as we ‘fair and share’ this harvest today and tomorrow.

2 Corinthians 9.15: *Thanks be to God for his gift which is beyond all praise!*