

Harvest

“You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.”

We are invited, on this one Sunday in the year, to rejoice in the abundance of the created world; to be grateful for the harvests which bring daily sustenance to our table and, amidst the very complex chain of food production, to give thanks to God for the bounty which we so often take for granted. It prompts us to think about the processes that have taken place which have led to our food to be on our table today, here in Wimbledon and also around the world.

Food is well known as a theme in scripture ... the Promised Land that flows with milk and honey; Jesus, the bread of life; and of course the feeding of the five thousand.

There is something about food, about being fed, about eating with one another, that is so deeply spiritual.

I recently went to a talk at St Paul's Cathedral given by a lady called Sara Miles, who is Director of Ministry at St Gregory Episcopal Church in San Francisco. She has been described as one of the most exciting, prophetic voices in 21st Century Christianity.

Sara's story, also touching on the theme of food, is extraordinary: Her background is as a journalist and as a chef. She did not come from a background of Christian faith or church-going. In fact, she led a thoroughly secular life, being generally indifferent to religion, and sometimes even writing, as a journalist, of how appalled she was by the fundamentalist crusades of some Christians.

Yet one early, cloudy Sunday morning when she was forty-six years old, she found herself walking into a church, where she was drawn to eat a piece of bread, and to drink a sip of wine. She was not quite sure what made her walk in to the church on that day, nor did she, at the time, understand the meaning of taking the bread and the wine. This was to be her first communion and it was to change her life forever, and go on to change the lives of so many others.

Quite astonished by what she had done that morning in taking communion, the bread of life, Sara was filled with a desire to become part of the body of the church, but not in the conventional way as it turned out. It became clear to her, that her calling was... to pass the bread to others, to feed people.

This led Sara to set up a scheme called 'The Food Pantry' in the year 2000. Since then, every Friday, around the same altar at Saint Gregory's Church, where Sara first received the body of Christ ... free groceries are handed out to hundreds of hungry

families and individuals. They provide literally tons of fresh fruits and vegetables, rice, beans, pasta, cereal, bread to those in need, and they share this in their peaceful, sacred church space. The Food Pantry, which has become quite famous in the USA, is run entirely by volunteers - almost all of them people who originally came to receive food themselves and then stayed to help out.

The story of Sara's ministry, centred around the grit of real lives, is inspiring and still very fresh in my mind on this Harvest Festival Sunday.

Today, many of us are going to eat together - in a few moments we will gather at the Lord's Table to eat the bread and drink the wine. He invites us. We are his guests. Jesus will feed us, and renew us, and bless us through that simple act of eating and drinking. Here we will be fed and receive spiritual nourishment.

On the day when Jesus fed the 5000 thousand, and after they had given thanks, Jesus said "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you." (John 6: 27)

Jesus reinforces the message of Harvest Festival, that God gives to us abundantly, but he expressly says that we should share with others. And this should be done willingly and cheerfully.

As we are fed today, both spiritually and physically, may we keep in our prayers the many others around the world who will go hungry today: More than 800 million people, according to the World Food Programme. I am not suggesting that we be filled with guilt, but that we may be prompted into action, and if we can do that, it is certainly is something to celebrate.

Theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book 'Letters and Papers from Prison' said:

"Action springs not from thought, but from a readiness for responsibility"

There is so much considerable truth in that statement. We have the potential to do so much, in our calling as Christians: whether it is here, in Wimbledon, through the work of the Food Bank, Faith in Action or whether we support, though our charitable giving, for example to the World Food Programme to those in third world countries, where people live a hand to mouth existence, or worse still are facing starvation.

I am going to finish with a story :

A man once asked God to shed some light on the mystery of heaven and hell. God said, "Why not? First I'll show you hell"

The man suddenly found himself in an elegant, well-lit dining room. Many people were seated around a table set with a wonderful feast. The man thought God had made a mistake – surely this was heaven, not hell. Where were the fire and the tortured cries of the condemned? This was more like a five star restaurant. Then he noticed that, in spite of the abundance of food, the people there were pale and thin, suffering from extreme hunger. The man turned to God, confused.

"Keep looking" was all God said.

Each person held a spoon with a handle long enough to reach any of the fabulous dishes set out before them. However, since the handle was longer than their arms, they were unable to reach their mouths with any of the food. Now the man understood: People in hell were doomed to starve in the tormenting presence of enough food to last forever, but with useless spoons.

"Now I'll show you heaven", God said

Upon arriving there, the man found himself standing in a dining room identical to the one he'd seen in hell, the table with the lavish feast, and the same long spoons. Yet there was one striking difference: here the people looked healthy, well-fed and happy.

"I don't understand", said the man "How can heaven and hell be the same and yet so different?"

"Simple," God said. "It isn't the length of the spoon that matters, but how one chooses to use it. Here, each guest feeds someone else, not himself".

Amen.