

So we come to harvest and today to our harvest festival. I'm sorry but I hate harvest. What does harvest mean – the end of the cricket season, the nights drawing in, the threat of winter and the cold and greyness. Yes I hate harvest. But then I love harvest. What does harvest mean – misty mornings and dew on cobwebs showing their shape, multi- coloured leaves shimmering in warm sunlight that have a different glow in the autumn, picking blackberries. Yes I love harvest.

In time past of course harvest was the opportunity to bring some of the produce we had grown to church and then for it to be distributed to older or needy people.

I used to love the harvest services and seeing the children bring their boxes of food and then look round a church and see all the gifts displayed, to sing the familiar harvest hymns and to be thankful, especially in a world where there are so many shortages and famines, that we have sufficient to live on. I don't know about you but harvest gives me a good feel.

Of course today harvest services as harvest is very different. I know some of us have allotments and vegetable patches and fruit trees in our gardens but by and large we don't grow anything and of course we live in an urban society where food is not grown.

However harvest still is a time to reflect upon God's provision.

It is time to reflect upon God's provision for us as a nation. Has it been a good harvest? Has God provided for us? I'm sure you read in the Farmer's weekly 14th August the comment that, "recent rain has brought harvest to a halt across much of the UK but so far both progress and yield have been generally pleasing". We can thank God for the harvest.

But also harvest time is time for us to reflect on God's goodness to us as individuals and to recognise his faithful provision for us. It is a time to reflect on how blessed we are and then, from that blessing, to offer back to God some of what he has given us that it may be a blessing to others. Today we do that not in terms of baskets of fruit and veg to be taken out to some older friends but in terms of pasta and cans to be taken to the Camrose centre to help provide for those who are homeless or struggling in other ways. This year as well our financial giving will go again to Tearfund but this year not to an ongoing project as in previous years when we have supported the work in Cambodia and other places. This year our financial giving will go to the Refugee Crisis Fund to help provide for those fleeing war in different parts of the world.

I want to encourage us in this reflection and giving by turning to 2 Corinthians 9:6-15.

Paul was writing to the Corinthians about their giving. They had started a collection for the Christians in Jerusalem who were having a tough time. But for some reason that collection had stopped and Paul wrote to encourage them to continue it and complete it so he could take it to Jerusalem.

His words to them helps I pray to encourage us.

1. The call to generosity

I remember hearing the story of a little boy who went to church with his parents one day. On the way home he listened as they moaned about the service – they didn't like the hymns, the sermon was too long, they couldn't hear the person doing the reading. After a while the boy piped up, "but what do you expect for 50p?"

Paul here encouraged these Christians to an attitude of generosity in their giving. He called them v7 to make their own decision about what they should give but not to give sparingly or reluctantly but cheerfully and generously because that reflects the giving heart of God.

Today is very much a one off situation and yet the same call applies as God calls us to be generous in seeking to provide for the needs of others. However, this also applies doesn't it to our regular giving to God's work here at Christ Church giving which enables us to continue our ministry with children and young people, to reach out to others in our community with the good news of Jesus as with the women's breakfast yesterday, to support the work with street children through the house of hope in Chandigarh India, the work of the chaplaincy in Basingstoke and so on.

Paul's call to those Christians and to us is to give and to give cheerfully and generously.

Let me ask are those the words that describe our attitude to giving? Do they describe the way we give today? Do they describe the way we give to God's work here at Christ Church through the year? Cheerful generous giving is what we are called to.

2. The generous grace of God v8-11

His call is based totally on the grace of God. Why did he ask them to give – because God had given them so much. How would they be able to give – because God would supply all they need so that they could give.

Just look with me at v8 to see this truth as Paul teaches it to them and us, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work".

I don't normally put verses from the Bible passage we are studying up on the screen but I have today because I want us to really grasp this essential truth.

The sentence begins with the fact that "God is able to make all grace abound to you" or his is able and willing to bless us abundantly. The same is there in v11 where Paul says "you will be enriched in every way".

Let's reflect for a moment on our lives and recognise just how God has graciously given to us as individuals. He has given us life and health. He has given us knowledge and wisdom he has given us abundantly in terms of food and drink and finance. Today on this harvest festival reflect on the generous grace of God and then later as we sing Great is thy faithfulness let's sing it from our hearts

in thanks for all God's gifts. But all these things our health, wisdom and finance we can share with others. We as it says in v11 have been enriched in every way so that we can be generous on every occasion.

But coming back to v8 God's grace has abounded to us, that is the starting point but it is not the end point. His grace has been generous to us so that, look at it with me, so that "in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work". I hope we can see the emphasis on all in that verse.

Friends I hope this is clear what God is saying through Paul to these Christians in Corinth and to us today. God gives us graciously so that we might also give graciously and generously.

I heard once of a man who was very good at collecting in his local area for various charitable funds. However, at one house he had never had any joy. It was a large house with a seemingly prosperous owner. Eventually one day he met the man and challenged him, "I've often asked you for contributions," he said, "and you have never responded. Yet you have this large house and a good car. How can you refuse to contribute to this worthwhile cause?"

"Actually" replied the man, "I have another large house by the sea. I own a chain of stores. However have you any idea of the state of my family? Did you know that my mother has a heart condition and is continually in and out of private hospitals which charge exorbitant rates? I have three sisters with three sons all going through private education. Do you realise how much that costs? And if I don't give a penny to them why should I give anything to you?"

Well God calls us to have the opposite attitude to that man and he does so on the basis of all that God has given to us and will provide for us so that we can be generous and cheerful givers of our time, our talents and our money to others.

God gives us so much in so many ways that we might give to others, which is a blessing to them and to us. In v10 Paul describes it as God giving us seed to sow which produces a harvest of our righteousness that is the fruit of work done for God to his praise and glory and at the end of v11 we see "your generosity will result in thanksgiving, which leads us to

3. the results of generous giving v12-15

God calls his people to generous giving as a proper response to his generous grace. When we do respond what are the results? As we look at these verses we see four results of generous giving, needs are met, God is praised, the genuineness of faith is proved and prayer is offered for the givers.

a. needs are met, we see that in v12 and in one sense it is an obvious result of giving. As we today give to the Camrose centre or Tearfund needs will be met. Yes of course not every need of every person but our gifts will make a difference to some people. In the refugee camps in Lebanon and

Jordan our gifts can be used to bring food and medicine to those in need and in doing that bring encouragement and hope to those who have lost so much.

b. praise to God, we see that in v12. Remember Paul is writing about gifts made to Christian brothers and sisters and he sees that the result of their giving will be those people thanking God for his provision through their Christian friends. Now the same cannot be said for the gifts we offer today, they will go to people of all religions and none. However, they will produce gratitude and we can be assured that Tearfund as a Christian organisation will use our gifts to help and in so doing be pointing people to God's love and through that may well result in God being praised.

I remember when I first became a Christian the church I was attached to ran a soup kitchen for the homeless every Sunday tea time. I got involved in that and helped prepare and serve the food. But always at some point in the proceedings someone would say grace. Now that may seem very little perhaps even seem like a sop to our Christian conscience but to me then and now it was to all there a reminder that the food had been provided by God and that the service was a result of God's love in Jesus.

c. faith is proved. In v13 Paul says "because of the service by which you have proved yourself". Their generous giving is a practical outworking of their faith. It is walking the talk. So it should be with all of us. God's heart bleeds as he sees the plight of so many in our world and so does ours. But that can never be the end of it. God seeing the plight of humanity separated from him by our sin acted to send his son to die. He gave that which was most precious that we might live. If we own the name of Jesus can we be content simply with fine words. No our actions in generous giving prove the love of God is in our hearts.

d. prayerful gratitude v14. The saints in Jerusalem when they received the gifts would in thanks pray for the Christians in Corinth because of the grace God had given them and because they had acted as a result of that grace.

On this harvest Sunday whether we view harvest warmly or not God's call to us is clear to be generous and cheerful givers in the light of his generous grace to us. As we give people's needs are met and praise is given to God. May God stir us today on this special day to give generously and may that then continue in our regular giving to those in need and to the ministry of Jesus here at Christ Church.