



Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
Sunday 2 October 2011

For all your world we plead

A sermon by Canon Chris Chivers

Readings: Isaiah 5.1-7; Matthew 21.33-46

There's a story told of Archbishop Desmond Tutu – it seems right to begin with him this morning as he celebrates his 80th birthday later this week – that on his first Sunday as Archbishop of Cape Town he was invited to preach at a church where the priest was clearly keen to impress. So he laid on a lovely liturgy and impressed on his wife the importance of the meal afterwards. Archbishop Desmond confessed to me once that he'd only in fact had a Bacardi and coke that whole day, so by the time the services was over and he was heading to rectory he was starving! There, lined up on his arrival, were all the vicar's children. "He was clearly very good at breeding," the archbishop also confided to me, chuckling and adding, "They were lined up like the Von Trapp family singers – a black version." They ushered the archbishop in and then there seemed to be an interminable delay which the Arc found very difficult because he was starving. "Say grace," he urged the children, as the priest arrived, saw the frozen look on his children's faces – clearly this was a house where grace wasn't said – and saw his hopes of preferment going out the door. "Say the prayer that mummy said this morning," he stammered in a loud stage whisper to his youngest daughter in an attempt to save face. She clasped her hands together and solemnly began, "Dear God, why did we have to invite that awful preacher today?"

I'll leave you to make such judgements a little later on but Grace at least – or our tendency perhaps to forget to give thanks – seems a good place to start on a Harvest Festival. But before we get to thanks, allow me to take you not to the dining table but somewhere perhaps less expected.

"Father, I'm so glad to see you. I've been keeping something for you."

The priest was at the local rubbish dump and recycling centre, struggling to lift heavy planks of wood into a skip. "This shouldn't be melted down, should it," the man said, handing the priest a heavy brass cross. "It deserves a decent home."

How had it got there? Who had slung a brass cross onto the local rubbish dump? No-one knew.

But a cross in a rubbish dump. There's nothing very new in that of course. It's as old as the story itself.

Golgotha was, after all, the rubbish dump of Jerusalem. The less than green hill of the famous hymn, far away, without a city wall, where the Son of Man dumped the planks of wood he'd struggled to carry and was strung up on them for nine agonising hours.

Golgotha, the rubbish-dump beyond the vineyard, where our Gospel reading ends up this morning. The vineyard itself, given by God to tenants, to his chosen, the Jewish people; the vineyard which the divine landowner attempted to harvest through his messengers, through kings and prophets; but the vineyard – so Matthew's bitingly allegorical tale informs us – in which these messengers were beaten, from which they were ejected before the landowner's Son, the Christ himself, was finally cast out, murdered on the land-fill outside the city wall.

'The foliage and the fruit' of the Vineyard, turned in the words of the poet Edwin Muir 'to shapes of terror and of grief.' The story told in a thoroughly anti-Jewish way to depict a harvest of hate,

burned so deep on the hard-drive of our Christian consciousness that it's caused untold damage to our ability to sow let alone to harvest productively, sensitively, faithfully in the vineyard, the mission field which is God's world.

None of this is I guess where any of us expect to be this morning as we come to give thanks for the rich gifts, the glorious bounty of God's creation, the harvesting of which provides us with our daily bread. But if I learnt long ago from a host of priests that you must never avoid the Gospel as set, I also learnt some words of St Augustine: "If you only say one prayer in your life, make it thank you."

Which means that harvesting the Gospel – a very considerable challenge this morning – shouldn't see us under-play the impulse to express our thanks. The very word Eucharist – one of the words we use to describe the common, normative Christian meal in which we're sharing now – means thanksgiving. That's always the Christian context for Harvest. After all, we are to give thanks for the provision of our daily bread at each Eucharist, indeed we pray for it every time we say the Lord's Prayer.

But, and it's a big but, as we give thanks we must get real. We must own up to the strangeness of the 'fields that we have planted / so long with crops of love and hate' to use another phrase from Edwin Muir's poem *One foot in Eden*. We must note the way 'the corn and tares [are] compactly grown ... Evil and good [stood] thick around in the fields of charity and sin / Where we have led our harvest in.'

Our sowing and reaping has frankly been mixed and it's too often dented our integrity as it's marred our ability to be good stewards and faithful harvesters.

But we must not only get real about the historical impact of the way we've sown and harvested on the basis of the skewed interpretation at the heart of Mathew's story. We must also get real about the way we go on pushing people outside the vineyard walls – supposing, indeed, that God's vineyard has walls in the first place – and thereby dismissing hope as we consign it to the rubbish tip beyond those cloistered inner sanctuaries where we guard and tabernacle truth.

Mike Davis's recent book, *Planet of slums*, suggests that very soon we may expect the reality of a Mumbai (Bombay, the setting for the film *Slumdog Millionaire*) to be normative for most world cities. Not simply Johannesburg with its Soweto or Cape Town with its Khayelitsha, or Calcutta with its Howrah Bridge and a million street dwellers – three cities I happen to know well myself – but every major city re-urbanised by the rural poor rushing towards its streets of supposed gold, in reality meaning a majority of its citizens living on the rubbish dumps outside the city walls. Soon a sixth of the world will live in such a context. Already in China 37% of the urban population live in city slums, that's 193 million people. In India it's 55%, 158 million, Pakistan 73%, 35 million, Nigeria 79%, 41 million, Sudan 85%, 10 million, Tanzania 92%, 11 million, Ethiopia 99%, 10 million and even in the USA where it's a meagre 5% that's nearly 13 million people. The rural environment ravaged by our inability to steward God's creation in a way that nourishes all. The vineyard pillaged and plundered by our failure to recognise that there's enough in the world for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed. Millions forced simply to live literally on what we discard.

That's the way this world's systems work. That's the consequence spiritually and physically of the way a story continues to be told which promotes the survival of the fittest, trickle-down-economics – which frankly never trickles down far enough – and the tyranny of a market which makes millions – billions of pounds – for a few people but whose pitiless acquisitiveness leaves many absolutely penniless.

This is harvest for too many outside the city walls. And let's not pretend we don't collude with such systems of inequality by playing those games which talk-up the plight of the poor but which don't address the way we actually live.

Which is why today, amidst the flowers and golden wavy corn – here so spectacularly because thank you is the central Christian prayer and because we've actually got to live into the tension I'm describing – allow me to hang on to your coat-tails here at St Martins and to do what this church is renowned the world over for doing, which is to allow voices from the so-called 'beyond' to resonate here. I have in mind voices, a story from one of the largest rubbish tips in the world – Kibera, also Africa's largest slum which sits on the slopes of Nairobi, in Kenya – and which I believe can offer us a real harvest of hope.

The voices, the story you may read for yourselves in a wonderful new book, *It happened on the way to war*, by former US marine, Rye Barcott, who was here in London on Friday at UCL for a Royal Africa Society event to talk about it.

To tell of the summer when he went to Kibera, lived in a ten-by-ten shack there, and found peace on the way to war in the Middle East, when he met two remarkable people – a Muslim community worker, Salim Muhamed, and a Christian nurse, Tabitha Festo, themselves living in shacks on streets down which sewage runs in open gullies. Two people, who didn't need to be shown let alone told how to turn a rubbish dump into a vineyard – they were starting to do it already – but who did need western support and assistance for their African plan. This came through a remarkable young American who listened to the stories of these Kenyans, sensed Salim's passion to use football to get kids into a safe educational and emotional environment where change could begin for them if only he had the equipment and the infrastructure he needed, and recognised Tabitha's ability to solve her community's problems, because she knew that if she had the money to buy basic vegetables from a local supplier, she could open a small shop in Kibera, not only to feed slum-dwellers at realistic prices but to make a profit which would build the medical clinic she showed Rye Barcott a year later. In just a year she converted her ten-by-ten shack into a clinic – a purpose-built Tabitha clinic now treats hundreds a day – using the two thousands Kenyan shillings, the 26 dollars, Rye Barcott gave her to start it, a start which has led to the creation of an extraordinary NGO, Carolina for Kibera – one of the best examples of grass-roots participatory development you'll find.

That's all it's taken in one place in the world to show how a rubbish dump can begin to look like a vineyard once again, and how the cross glints in the dump with the hope of resurrection if we notice it. A few footballs, shirts, shorts, goal posts – drilled, incidentally, with holes so no-one can think they're worth stealing for another use – twenty six dollars for vegetables, and above all a hell of a lot of listening. I use the unattractive phrase 'a hell of a lot' deliberately because a hell where there's no harvest outside the city wall is actually preventable. Hell can always in fact give way to heaven, if the tenants of the vineyard listen, not to their inner voice demanding more and more stuff – that material way lies the disconnect that turns people into objects and which leads to a Calvary, an Auschwitz, or an East African famine. No, not listening to those voices, but rather to the voice of God amidst the rubbish dump itself. The voice which teaches us to ask for our daily bread and no more – and which rightly demands that we do what we do now in remembrance of him – because this meal not only models the world we are to build, it actually begins to build it. Thanks be to God.