

Trinity 20 2021 - Matins

Joshua 14:6-14

Matthew 12:1-21

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I have to confess, the image of walking or running through fields, whether of corn or wheat, was rather ruined for me by Theresa May's revelation on Desert Island Discs that that was the naughtiest thing she had ever done. Evidently, she did not have the incident described by St Matthew at the forefront of her mind, though as the daughter of a vicar I feel sure she must have heard it.

Wheat fields have a particular place in the English imagination, and not only because of the visual image which our former Prime Minister conjured up for us. In an '*only in Kensington*' moment, I marvelled a few weeks ago at a Samuel Palmer oil painting in a parishioner's dining room, of a farmer on his way home through golden wheat fields by moonlight, which in turn brought to mind those great images we have from reading Thomas Hardy. I don't know how many of you remember the storm scene in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, in which the landscape is as much a character as Gabriel Oak or Bathsheba Everdene.

When I go home to Cheshire, I feel my shoulders relax as the train enters the gently rolling landscape – I know subliminally, from the size of the fields, the cows and mix of crops; the type of hedgerow and even the kind of gate used, that I am home.

All of this imagery, and our own experience, affects how we read a passage like today's, as we hear of Jesus's disciples plucking the ears of corn and eating. I find the slight hyper-reality of the English Romantic tradition a helpful illustration of what I think the evangelist, and Jesus, are trying to tell us about the fulness of God's vision for us, and this morning's passage made me think of Thomas Traherne's wonderful words, as set to music by Gerald Finzi: '*The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped nor was ever sown.*'

And yet, a note of caution, before we go too far. In our vision of glorious abundance, of golden fields waiting for harvest, or indeed of a young Theresa May skipping through the fields, there is no hunger, just as Traherne describes his orient and immortal what as never being reaped or ever sown.

And yet, we are told that the disciples '*were an hungred.*' They have given up everything to follow Jesus and their home is with Him. While we are told in the Beatitudes not to have a thought for what we will eat, because the Lord will provide, we are reminded here that that does not mean that we, and others, will not experience hunger. That there is not pain and real human need. The Lord may be providing, but that does not make life easy.

While at first blush the idea of plucking corn might sound idyllic, this is not a farmer nonchalantly breaking off a head of corn to chew over while standing in easy conversation; this is someone so hungry that he would eat raw corn, without the time and intervention that are necessary for the making of bread.

Bread, required for the Eucharist, at the core of our being as a Church, is also a sign of stability and civilisation. Such things are not however available to either the Son of Man or His disciples; at least not until the end, in Jerusalem.

You have to be pretty hungry to eat a raw ear of corn, though these disciples find their home and stability in the One with whom they journey.

And yet, having had our reminder of reality, that this is not all as in our romantic image of gentle abundance, we must also remember that they are still fed through the Father's bounty.

This story is also about the identity of Jesus. '*One who was among them who was more important than the Temple.*' A straightforward reading might be that we should simply do away with all these

silly rules: of course a rule prohibiting us from snapping off the head of the corn on the sabbath is wrong. And yet I only think this works because everyone in this story, the disciples and the Pharisees, are in the presence of Jesus, who is the personification of the Law and the personification of holiness.

The law cannot exist without interpretation, without prioritising the different rules, putting them in their proper order; something Jesus points to when He refers to priests in the Temple profaning the sabbath by working on it.

Now, I have some sympathy for this one.

Jesus is saying that by working on the sabbath, on the face of it the priests are breaking the sabbath. And yet, that would clearly be absurd, as they are needed for worship to happen. So, Mother Emma and I (and Simon, and Mark and Juliet and others) work on Sunday, to enable all of us to worship.

There is a priority of rules, and while we humans might get our priority of rules wrong, all falls into its rightful place around Jesus.

Are the disciples harvesting, which would surely involve laying up goods for themselves on the sabbath, or are they merely eating, which is allowed on the sabbath?

As St Irenaeus put it, *'God's glory is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God.'*

In Jesus we see the fullness of what it is to live as creatures of God, which is what the Law is properly about too. And we see the fullness of God's creation, and of His vision for us, in both the disciple eating directly from the growing corn, without the need for harvesting or processing; and in the healing that follows.

In a glorious reversal of the image of the disciple's hand plucking the full grain, we immediately meet a withered hand, literally in Greek a 'dried up' hand. The disciple's hand has reached for the fullness of God's creation in the corn, and now the withered hand reaches towards the source of all life, in Jesus Christ.

The Pharisees sense Jesus's healing power in advance and ask whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Jesus's power is potent, threatening grace and fecundity which only makes the Pharisees nervous. As Jesus goes into the synagogue, they later go out to plot.

And this image then gives way to that of the lost sheep in a pit. And the word for pit implies one dug in the earth as a trap, or even a grave.. But from what seemed to be death, it is then lifted out again. From seeming death comes resurrection.

In the presence of Jesus, all life is restored to its fullness. Remember, *'God's glory is man fully alive.'* And from the plucked corn, to the lost sheep found, and then back to the man, whose dried, withered hand has life restored to it, we return at the end of our passage to a poor *'bruised reed.'* Even if one of us is worth more than a sheep, following Isaiah, the Son of Man even has concern for a damaged reed, *'till he send forth judgment unto victory.'*

And so, rather than a dry discourse about the interpretation of rules, Jesus gives us a vision of God's Kingdom coming in on earth through fullness of life in its many forms.

And rather than simply being found in a Palmer painting of a golden wheat field, this is all of our inheritance, if we will only stretch out our hand for healing.