Theme:            Harvest Mission & the fruits of the Spirit

Text:                Galatians 5. 16-26

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.  Amen

Well, this does feel strange up here instead of down there in the middle.   You get a great feeling of power - it could quite go to my head.   You will all have to bear with me as this is my first ‘grown up’ sermon.   I don’t get licensed until next month so there is still time to get those letters off to the Bishop following this evening’s service.

I must say that one of the pleasures of preparing a sermon for this congregation as opposed to my usual 9.30 talks is not having to worry too much about time.   Normally, my talks have to be pretty short an sharp or the fidget factor will set in with the children.   The benefit of preaching to a more adult congregation is that the fidget factor sets in just the same but you are all too well behaved to throw tantrums.   I’ve now got you all worried that I am going to preach for half an hour but don’t panic.   George is so used to hearing me give short sharp talks that he will strike up the opening chord of the next hymn after five minutes regardless of whether I’ve finished.

It is a particular treat for me to be able to preach at this Harvest Festival.   I have been fortunate through life in having had a close relationship with farming - literally since birth.   My family in Ireland are all farmers, I did my degree in agriculture and spent the first part of my working life in the agricultural industry.   I even married a farmer’s daughter through the auspices of that rural equivalent of Dateline - the Young Farmers Club.   A slightly disconcerting link to harvest was the fact that as Elaine drove from the farm to the church for our wedding, she passed a fire engine with bells and lights in full array.   We didn’t discover until we got back to the farm that it was rushing to Elaine’s brother’s field where the combine harvester had just burst into flames. The saving grace was that the combining was being done by a contractor - not the farm’s own combine.   If the Lord was offering that as a sign, I have to say I am still trying to decipher it.

After leaving university, I started work on a quite wonderful job for ICI in the company’s fertiliser business.  I was plonked down into rural Berkshire, given an OS map and a list of farmer’s and told that my job was to keep them happy.  I didn’t have to actually sell them any fertiliser, the theory being that if they were happy with the technical services that I provided, they would buy our product from their local agricultural merchant.    In general, this worked pretty well and I had a blissfully happy few years driving around the county, soil sampling, silage sampling, crop walking, doing cashflow projections, calculating winter feed rations etc.   In the process, I got to know and love the rural community in which I worked.

I also got to know the land, the soil, the climate and the peculiarities of farming in that particular part of the country.    Crop walking, at any time of the year was a particular joy, especially for me on the chalk downland which as well as offering spectacular views of the White Horse Vale and the Thames valley, also offered some very specific challenges for growing cereals.

The experience reinforced for me in practice, what I had learned in theory in college about the vigilance and attention required to nurture a cereal crop through to a successful harvest and to then reap the benefits of yield.

This process started before a piece of ground was ploughed or a seed was sown with an understanding of what your land was capable of.  What sort of soil were we dealing with, how deep was the soil, how rich, what was the history of the field, the lie of the land.    Then came the preparation of the seedbed.   Now we needed to add to our understanding of the soil by understanding what the weather had done or was likely to do.  Was it going to help with forming a perfect seedbed or hinder it.  Too little cultivation and the seed would be trying to root on a moonscape, too much and it could be a paddy field.

Then on to the selection of the seed itself, what type of crop to grow, what variety, should the seed be chemically treated for pest and disease resistance or not?   Should we put some fertiliser in with the seed or was their sufficient nutrients in the soil.

Then as the crop was growing, the constant checks for weeds, pests and diseases.   Is there enough of a problem to warrant spraying or should we save the money?   Can we afford to wait another week in case a hard frost does the job for us?   Then when the decision to spray is taken, which product to use?  Should we mix sprays together to avoid having to go back and spray for something else the following week?   Is it dry enough to spray?   Is there too much wind?

The same decisions over fertiliser - although given my bias, the motto was usually the more the merrier.   And so it goes on through the life of the crop, a complex series of decisions all of which will influence the quality of the harvest when the crop finally matures.

Now this harvest, here in St Boniface and throughout the Deanery is particularly special, because we are, as you all know in the midst of our Combined Harvest Mission.   And here we are, rather like a farmer, looking forward to a bumper harvest but in our case, a harvest of souls.  We sit here in expectation that our harvest will be a great success that our words and deeds will touch people throughout the deanery and bring them flooding through the doors of our churches as converted and committed Christians.   To make sure that we don’t make a mess of the combining and ruin the crop, we’ve even got some experienced contractors in to give us a hand so it should all go terribly well.

But wait a minute, what were we saying earlier on about the work that leads to a good harvest?    About all that preparation in preparing our seedbed, choosing seeds, deciding on the husbandry that will lead to greater yields.   Are we sure we’ve got that all sorted out?   If not, our harvest could be petty disappointing.   So what is our Christian equivalent of these acts of husbandry?   How can we be sure that the seedbed we have prepared is a good one?   That the crop we have sown is well tended and that we will reap the rewards of committed new members for our Christian community, or at least, non members who are now thinking about their relationship with the wondrous loving God, previously absent from their thoughts and their lives.

Our preparation is evident in all of us.   The quality of our husbandry shines out, for good or ill, from the worshipping community of this and the other churches in the deanery.   We, are what the people out there see as the representation on earth of Christ’s kingdom and promise.  Our attitudes, our behaviours and our actions speak far louder than any words we might utter to all and sundry of the quality of our Christian husbandry.

But how do we assess the quality of that husbandry as we move towards our harvest.  In our informal assessments of the quality of one of our number against another, we focus on those things which are visible, obvious and measurable.   Does someone attend church regularly?   Do they drink or swear?   Do they do their bit in the community?     Don’t get me wrong, all of these things are important parts of Christian living but the real test is often ignored.   That test was laid out plainly for us by St Paul in the reading.   The fruits of the Spirit are the signs of the quality of our Christian husbandry.   If we display those fruits then they shout loudly to those outside the church and call them in.   If they are absent then all of our fine words are wasted.   The harvest will be poor because we failed to nurture the fruits within our own church.

Now measuring the fruit of the Spirit is a tall order and is not easy.   Let us just remind ourselves of St Paul’s definition.  The fruit of the Spirit is, says Paul, “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.”.     So - how do you measure love, or goodness?   These fruits of the Spirit are not only tough to measure, they are tough to achieve.   It is much easier to stop swearing than to live forever with godly patience.

When we look again at Paul’s list of the fruits; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control, we can see that, if we take the time and the trouble we can observe these behaviours in others and, most importantly, if we are truly observant, in ourselves.   The fruits do, however, tend to be a package deal.   Someone may have great self-control but no love.   Another may display great inner peace but no sign of kindness towards others.   So, we conclude that someone exhibiting the behaviours that we believe represent these fruits of the Spirit must indeed be filled with the Spirit

It is worth remembering why St Paul was moved to write this list and give this guidance to the church in Galatia.   The reason was very straightforward, in modern parlance, he was fed up to the back teeth with them.   His opening is as aggressive as you will find in any letter.   He attacks the church for losing sight of it’s true aims and focussing on false doctrine and internal politics.    The letter is a true ‘back to basics’ plea for the church to refocus on what really matters - living our lives as channels of God’s eternal love.   It is as relevant for our church today and for every Christian church as when it was first written.

The virtues that Paul lists as the fruits of the Spirit are, therefore, the virtues that should characterise our Christian life.    Do we honestly in our hearts believe that we individually and collectively display those fruits.   Does this church shine out as an example to others of true Christian living.  Are we, as a group, filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.    If the answer to that is no, then we have got some work to do to ensure that our harvest is the bumper crop that our loving Father deserves.

**Tom Crotty**