Spiritual Harvest:- is it about perfection?

Harvest.... to me, a farmer’s daughter from Warwickshire, it means piles of golden grain; wheat and barley, cut, threshed, winnowed and put into store, usually with a lot of stress and worry... Will it rain? Will the combine break down? (they were bad days...) Is the protein high enough, the moisture low enough.....then finally the reckoning – is the yield great enough...? All about measuring and grading – an adding up; a counting of worth – of striving for perfection even.

So I was wondering then, what is Spiritual harvest? Is it too about striving for perfection? There is the odd scripture that might seem to imply this; in Matthew Jesus is quoted as saying ‘Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect’. However, the parallel passage in Luke (6; 32-36), which we just heard, Jesus concludes the bit about loving our enemies by saying ‘be merciful, just as your Father is merciful – just as he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.’ So maybe... ‘perfect’ actually means... being kind and merciful. After all, Jesus talks almost invariably about love, forgiveness, humility and mercy. And he spends his time with the seeming failures of the world – the poor, the weak, the hungry, the harassed, the hopeless, the sick, the disabled and the outcast.... and his rare chastisements are not directed at them, but at the seemingly perfect; the people who appeared to have got it all right, the clever, wealthy, educated; the leaders of the day.

This can be quite a challenge to us; it certainly is to me....so much of our society and culture seems to reinforce this drive for perfection..... and yet what does that do to us?

Do any of you watch TED talks? There is one by a lady called Brene Brown (obviously American, with a name like that..!) about the power of **vulnerability**. She describes her research on what she called ‘**whole-heartedness’** and observes that ‘wholehearted’ people have the following qualities: Compassion ; Connection; Courage – and Vulnerability. Courage, interestingly, comes from the Latin ‘cor’ meaning heart; and she suggests could mean ‘telling your story with your whole heart’ – ie, not missing out the bad bits, the shameful bits, the bits we’d much rather no-one knew about, our weaknesses and failures – our vulnerabilities. She also observes that when we try and hide or numb our vulnerable feelings, we end up numbing all of them, including joy and gratitude – which can lead to depression, or addiction in one of its many forms.

I guess if this is true, Jesus knew this too. His many parables about losing and finding; the lost coin, the lost sheep, the prodigal son, all seem to suggest that failing (or losing) is natural and inevitable. But they also speak about return – to God’s endless mercy, his huge embrace of love and compassion. So maybe he’s trying to show us that this cycle of falling and restoration – of failing and being picked back up again, of sinning and receiving mercy – that this is **normal**, even healthy and desirable. And maybe it’s desirable because......as long as we keep **failing**, we keep **remembering** that we are in need of mercy, of God’s kindness...., and when we **know** that, we are actually able to **receive** it.

The implications of this are huge...if, at some level, our weakness is the key (and in Corinthians Paul said very clearly ‘when I am weak, then I am strong’), then how are we to regard our own weaknesses and failures, those parts of ourselves that we dislike and are ashamed of? Brene Brown concluded that we need to stop trying to be perfect; we need to let ourselves be truly seen by others; we need to love with our whole hearts, (which means **without** guarantees, by the way); we need to practice gratitude and joy, and we need to know that we are enough. This last one can be tricky; so many of us feel that we are not enough, unless we are achieving, succeeding, winning... and yet this isn’t what Jesus said or modelled at all – all **he** said was that we need to be like children, in simplicity and trust.

Brene had one more gem; she observed that we also numb vulnerability by trying to make the uncertain, certain, by trying to control and predict things – and that in **religion** we do that by pursuing fundamentalism, rather than by embracing mystery and faith; and in doing this we tend to blame others for what is wrong..... This conveniently brings me back round to loving our enemies; so easy to say, so hard to do. But perhaps the path to doing that is to start by loving ourselves better – by facing and embracing all that is weak and fearful within ourselves – after all, Jesus did command us to love our neighbour **as ourselves**. If we can learn to know, accept and love ourselves fully, then we may be able to stop being angry and blaming, and find a way to start really loving others, and not just those who are nice to us or do things our way.

That lovely hymn we just sang said, ‘let love be real, a haven free from posing and pretending, where every weakness may be safely known ...... that helps us face the risk of truly living, and makes us brave to be what we might be’. To me this is a vision of heaven on earth – the kingdom of God right here and now.... it’s not about a one-off harvest of perfection and making the grade, but about learning to accept ourselves and each other fully, and trusting the power at the heart of life which will love us into wholeness and healing, if we will only allow it.

And that’s the kind of church I want to belong to. I hope that through the training and experience I’ve been lucky enough to receive for my Pastoral Ministry I can become a small part of building that kind of community – one where we can practice being open, vulnerable, kind and merciful to ourselves, and so to each other, and in doing all this become true sons and daughters of the Most High God.