

James writes...

On care for our common home



'O give thanks to the Lord, for his is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever.'
(Psalm 136)

On 8th October at St John's we will celebrate Harvest. At our All Age service and at Choral Evensong, we will give thanks to the Lord for his goodness, and for all his gifts to us in Creation and Harvest. Psalm 136, like many other Psalms, is a litany of praise, based around God's abundant provision for his people. And for centuries Anglicans, with other Christians, have celebrated these gifts, and especially the ingathering of crops before winter. Our ties to agriculture in urban areas may be less pronounced, but we still take seriously the value of this annual act of praise and thanksgiving.

Recent events, however, show us that our Harvest, in reality, is part of something far greater than merely one day of celebration each year. Harvest, if we look wider, is part of a much bigger awareness of our intimate relationship with Creation and our moral responsibility towards it, at all times and in all places. For if we open our eyes to both the vast environmental challenges facing our world, and indeed to the centrality of Creation to Christian theology and ethics, we realise that a fundamental shift in our thinking is required. Pope Francis, writing in his 2015 encyclical 'Laudato Si' captures this shift simply in the subtitle of the letter: *'On care for our common home'*. How do we actively demonstrate care for our common home, not only at Harvest, but throughout our lives?

All of us are aware of disturbing trends and threats to our global environment. The increase in extreme weather events, including last month's Hurricane Irma and the devastating floods in Nepal and Bangladesh, which left millions displaced. Heightened drought in East Africa and the Middle East, and rising sea levels, affecting many poorer low lying parts of the world. Concerns about climate change and CO2 emissions, alongside other forms of pollution. All these cannot fail our attention. Following the UN Paris Agreement of 2016, many countries (sadly excluding the USA) are now working towards reduced emissions, including new carbon free energy technologies. There is much work to be done, and quickly, if irreversible environmental costs are to be mitigated.

It is important to realise, for an ordinary parish like St John's, the extent to which Christians (worldwide) are actively engaging with this agenda at all levels; a trend which ought to impact on how we embed these concerns in our parish, as well as elsewhere. In 1989, following the prompting of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Christians initiated a new liturgical season of 'Creationtide' – between 1st September and 4th October, the Feast of St Francis, patron saint of ecology – as a way of drawing such concerns to our attention. I hope, in future, to embed liturgical material throughout this time, that remind us of '*care for our common home*'; not just at Harvest, but beyond.

There are also wide-ranging initiatives to help bring environmental awareness to the forefront of our prayer, lifestyle, thought and action, including the work of A Rocha UK and its 'Eco Church' awards. This is something that was part of my previous benefice, and provides an empirical way of embedding good practice in Christian communities. For instance, where do we stand on teaching about care of God's Creation, promoting sustainable living and recycling, as well as looking after the wildlife around us? Often schools are ahead of churches in leading the way. There are so many innovative ways in which Churches can engage, and thus make a real difference. As Pope Francis suggests, we need an 'integrated ecology', a new way of relating to the world, social, economic and environmental, as well as spiritual, and education is a big part of this.

But what, you may be asking, has this to do with Christian faith? Well, the answer is everything. For we believe that God made the world and indeed all Creation, and saw that 'it was good'. The Bible shows us that we are all profoundly inter-connected, human beings, all life, air, earth, sea, and sky. God calls us to live more simply, and to learn an attitude of trust, and of reverence for all life. Care of our common home (God's Creation), is not an optional extra, for Harvest only, but intrinsic to our whole life of faith and ethics and discipleship. As Patriarch Bartholomew writes, 'we are called to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale.' May we, at St John's, be alive and committed to this, that our Christian faith and every-day human living be true worship of God.