

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Matthew 13:1-9 ("The Parable of the Sower and the Seed")

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!" Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

We plough the fields and scatter (CH229)

God, whose farm is all creation (CH226)

Praise God for the harvest of orchard and field (CH230)

For the fruits of all creation, thanks be to God (CH231)

There are many ways of looking at the theme of Harvest Thanksgiving, and each of these ways has its merits. The most straightforward and arguably the best is to look at the topic from the viewpoint of us, the consumers of bread and wine, meat and cheese, fish and seafood, and so, so many different types of vegetables, grains and pulses. From where we stand, our profoundly practical experience of harvest is truly something to be thankful for. Thankful to God.

In the words of an anonymous Korean hymn:

*God, who made the earth, declared it good in the beginning,
planned a time and purpose for all things that were and would be.
While earth remains, there will be seed-time and harvest,
summer sun and winter moon, the dead of night, the bright day.*

There are other viewpoints too. What about those farmers whose daily living involves such hard work, such uncertainty, such risks posed by forces of nature far beyond their control? These are people who might appear to the outsider to have an idyllic life. It must be fun out in the carefree fields all day. It must be great to have that bumper harvest and all that cash that will come with it. It must be great to live in that big house on the hill, so far removed from the cares and concerns of city life. Little do these people know. A farming friend of ours from Washington State, USA, told us recently about those years when her father made a big profit ... but ... a big profit which had to cover the big losses of the failed crop 12 months earlier, and which might need to be kept safely in the bank for the very possible losses 12 months from now. Farming is stressful, and today of all days, we want to say a huge "THANK YOU!" to those who not only plough the fields and scatter, but who also plough on through risk and anxiety.

In the words of a Brian Wren hymn, specially chosen for our service today:

*Praise God for the harvest of orchard and field, praise God for the people who gather their yield,
the long hours of labour, the skills of a team, the patience of science, the power of machine.*

A further viewpoint: harvest thanksgiving is a time when we reflect on the huge disparity in resources, as between those people in our land whose food comes from well-stocked supermarkets and posh delis, and those who are fed by foodbanks and maybe even soup kitchens. Each autumn in services like this, it is good to be reminded of the basic truth that harvest is about sharing the food and spreading the justice, so that all can have enough, with no-one's health - no-one's life - being threatened whether by the social sin of starvation or the equal and opposite personal sin of over-consumption. It may well be that we expect our standard of living to increase year by year, with bank balances growing ... growing ... growing. Yet where is the benefit to society in that, if our neighbour in the next street or the next town is left with a poor diet today, and a poor quality of life in time to come?

In a similar way, affluent industrial nations have all sorts of ports and refrigerated warehouses and transport networks, in and out of which are perpetually flowing mangoes from Brazil and pineapples from the Philippines, cucumbers from the Netherlands and potatoes from Cyprus. First, think about how this globalisation of our menus has burgeoned over the last half century. (As I have said at previous harvests, before I was 17 I had never set eyes on either a kiwifruit or passionfruit.) Now, think about those parts of the world in which that infrastructure simply isn't there. The range of opportunities we enjoy is far beyond the reach of most people in our world, whose options are few and whose daily income is very, very low.

In the words of a Joseph Booth hymn:

*Loving Lord, we know you care, let the world your goodness share;
save us from our selfish greed, finding you in those in need.*

The whole notion of harvest is one which, across the ages, writers have played with in a spiritual sense, most famously, perhaps in our Bible reading today from Matthew's gospel. And although these words were written by a first century scribe, the parable itself originally came from the lips of Jesus himself. At this Sunday of the year it is a little too easy for us to think that Jesus is speaking literally, as though this story is actually about a sower who went out to sow. In fact, Jesus uses this parable (as he uses all his parables) to create a dazzlingly clear mental image inside the head of each and every listener, who is then encouraged to go far beyond the picture, to dig deep into the insight, the reality, being offered: ... on life ... or death ... or love ... or salvation ... or eternity. In fact, it has been said that parables can be amazing because they can convey such rich truths for listeners to turn over in their minds.

What, then, about the parable of the sower? If you want to unlock what Jesus is getting at here, perhaps it is best to view the story as a means of showing what help some seeds to grow and what hinders other seeds from even taking root, far less flourishing. Four examples are offered:

- ✦ *Some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up:* the path was, no doubt, solid and dry and habitually trampled, with no seed protection offered by rich, soft, damp soil. Exposed and vulnerable, the little seeds fell prey to passing birds, who gobbled them up. No more seeds, and no prospect of a harvest;
- ✦ *Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil:* again, these seeds were out in the open, so when the Mediterranean sun radiated its searing noontide heat, the seeds became frazzled in an instant;
- ✦ *Other seeds fell among thorns:* when these unwanted thorny weeds encircled the seedlings, there was no chance. Yes, there was some growth, but before long the little plants were choked to death;
- ✦ *Other seeds fell on good soil:* these were the seeds which brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

What follows needs to be a question: who are we in this story? The farmer sowing the seeds, perhaps? Well, no, because this good farmer would have to be God.

OK then, we must be the seeds which either get destroyed or grow to flourish, bearing much grain. That's a very tempting thought, but it is not what Jesus is pointing to. The seeds are, in fact, the seeds of divine truth, as sown by God, the farmer. In short, the seeds represent God's Good News sent out to the world ... scattered by God, the farmer, ready to be received by the people (you and me).

We are not the farmer. We are not the seeds. We therefore have to be the ground. We, who are the place where God's message lands, may be the path with no soil whatsoever (where the message will immediately be pounced upon and destroyed). Or we may be the rocky ground with only a little soil (where the message will quickly shrivel up and die); or we may be the thorny ground (where the message will be strangled by those weeds which have taken hold). Alternatively, perhaps we might just be the ground which is ready with good soil, deep and healthy and receptive (where the growth will be impressive, and the harvest great).

If this story were just about the ground with its different amounts and qualities of soil, it might very well be that we should be asking that good farmer equip us with the rich soil of faith, laid down upon the ground of our lives. The farmer wants us to be fruitful, no matter the cost to him. As the theologian Mary Luti points out: "... it isn't only about whether your soil is good enough. It's also about a farmer's effort ... to risk everything, as year after year farmers always do." Amen.

Praying for others

Dear Lord God our heavenly Father,
our eyes are full of the colours of early autumn, the harvested fields and
the changing of the trees as leaves brighten and fall in the wind.
Yet we know that in so many places of our world there is no joy because of violence
and war, because of famine and flood and fire, because of fear and tyranny.
We pray for the institutions of the world and their leaders that all things may be
made better, that people may come to peace and sufficiency, that joy may flow
among every people and every nation.
We pray for our own people and community and church. Bless those among us who
are struggling with problems. Be with those who are ill and those who are grieving.
May we know the comfort of your steadfast love for us and
all your mercy which is from everlasting to everlasting.
Lord, keep us day by day in faith to support and strengthen us;
and fill us every morning with hope.
Waken us, O Lord.
Open our eyes to your glory. Open our ears to your story.
Open our hearts to your fire. Open our wills to your desire.
These and all our prayers we ask in the name Jesus, our Saviour and Lord.
Amen.

Weekly Updates ...

Longniddry Fruit Festival 2026: This year's inaugural event is on this Saturday (3rd) at Longniddry Church, from 1-4pm. Come along and enjoy the produce of the village, transformed by local cooks into jams, chutneys and so much more!

Harvest Thanksgiving Services: These will take place on Sunday 4th October in Longniddry Church at 9.45am and Gladsmuir Church at 11am. Donations of non-perishable items (tins, packets, jars, etc.) will benefit the work of East Lothian Foodbank.

Autumn Concert!: Come to Longniddry Church on Thursday 8th October at 7pm to hear the transition musicians of Longniddry Primary School and Preston Lodge High School perform pieces they have been learning. Interval refreshments provided by Longniddry Gala Committee. Admission by donation, with proceeds benefiting the schools' music activities and the Gala.

New Age Kurling: Tuesdays from 2-4pm in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

Wednesday Club: From 2.30-4pm in Room 2, Longniddry Church. Come along and enjoy a variety of activities and tea/coffee.

Sporting Memories Group: Thursdays from 10.30am-12 noon in Room 3, Longniddry Church.

Community Art Group: All welcome to come along on Thursdays at 2.15pm in Longniddry Church, Room 2. Free of charge.