

***“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst”*** (St. John 6.35)

What does it mean that we are “giving thanks” this weekend? Of course, we give thanks for our families and friends. We give thanks for the food we eat. We give thanks that the Lord has spared us after the passing of a storm. But, as we find in our readings for this week, we also give thanks to the Lord for the Spiritual Harvest he has accomplished in us through Jesus, the Son.

Truly, it is important that we always give thanks to the Lord for the nourishment he has provided for us. We thank him for the vegetables we have been able to grow, for the ability to feed livestock. Yes, it has been a long, hard, rainy summer which has led to a fair amount of stress in both the growing and feeding departments, but He has still provided for us. This Harvest Thanksgiving celebration is a checkpoint along the journey from where we started back in May at Rogationtide, when Fr. Kevin and I went around blessing seeds, gardens, and the food forest [here] at St. Mary's. We did that so that God would be with the growers, he would be alongside the harvesters, that he would grant us a successful harvest to be nourished during the winter that is to come. The season of growing has passed, the trees are now turning all their bright colours, and it is (unfortunately) time to start looking towards the coming winter.

But, in parallel to this physical growing season and harvest, God has also been nurturing the seeds of our souls – weeding and watering our faith – during this same growing season. This Harvest is a double celebration where we thank God for what he has provided us in nourishment both physically and spiritually.

This is a vein that runs throughout Scripture – and especially through the Gospels – that God feeds both our bodies and our souls. He plants the seeds, he waters them, and we reap the benefits of His gracious abundance. And this is where our readings for this Harvest celebration have left us, looking at the double metaphor of physical and spiritual nourishment.

We begin first in our Old Testament lesson from the Prophet Isaiah, written some five to eight hundred years before the birth of Jesus. There are two distinct sections here, specifically verses 1-3, and then the next paragraph are verses 10-12. The first of these sections is an open invitation to the readers to come to the feast hosted by the Lord God. It's an invitation to those who have nothing and can't afford to buy anything to come and eat anyway. It's an invitation to buy good things without having to actually pay for them. It's an image of God's plenty, his goodness and that he freely gives. But he asks: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food” (Isa. 55.2) Don't waste your time eating what doesn't fill you, basically. And what does fill you? The food that he, the Lord provides: “Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant...” (Isa. 55.3). So, this first section of our Lesson from Isaiah talks already about this double metaphor of physical and spiritual feeding.

But now, the second section, beginning at verse 10, looks ahead to something even better: “just as the rain and snow come down from heaven [to...] water the earth ... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose...” (paraphrase of Isa. 55.10-11). This promise, for us who know the latter parts of the story, *yells* out “Jesus!” – for we know that *he* is God's Word, according to John 1. And he will be sent forth to the earth to water it for an even greater reward. And to this, there is a great response of nature in celebration: the mountains and hill break into singing, and the trees of the field clap their hand. Nature worships the Lord at the wonderful news of the sending of his word! This is the food that will satisfy, and is the meat that shall not perish.

If we fast-forward now to our Gospel lesson for today from the Gospel according to St. John, we encounter some of these exact parallels. The opening words, in fact, echo what we read in the prophet: “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you” (John 6.27). God provides the food to eternal life, but it is received through the Son – Jesus. In response to a desire for the crowd to see a sign – to see proof – of what Jesus is claiming, Jesus says that the true bread of God is “he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (Jn 6.33). And who is this bread? Jesus says, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (6.35). Jesus – God’s Word – who has been sent forth from heaven to water all the seeds that have been planted. The seeds of the meat that never perishes, and the food that endures unto everlasting life. It is he, it is Jesus, who unlocks this for us with the first of his seven great “I Am” statements in John’s Gospel – each of which tells us something important about the nature of God. “I am the bread of life.”

When we rely on Jesus and believe in him, we will always be spiritually fed. This is that double metaphor – we rely on God to provide our food, and we also rely on him to feed our souls: to keep us healthy both physically and spiritually that we might have the strength to journey into everlasting life. What an amazing harvest this is.

These are just mere examples of the many occasions where agriculture is used to tell important truths in the Gospels. They are used because it is a familiar concept to the audiences of the day who could not go into Sobeys or Superstore in the dead of winter and purchase a fresh out-of-season product from somewhere else in the world. Until the last few centuries, in order to live you had to rely on the ground in your yard and rely on God. That’s it. And we see this illustrated in the stories Jesus tells about the seeds in rocky soil, about the workers in the vineyard, in the parable of the mustard seed, and when he tells his disciples to go out and reap the harvest when it is ready – and by this he means the spiritual harvest of souls ready to receive God.

Through this summer, through this growing season, how have you noticed your hearts and minds grow to be closer to God? How has the harvest of your souls come to fruition that they may be planted? And, maybe the best question, how have you planted the seeds of faith in others? Jesus calls his followers to make disciples of “all nations” – to turn *all people* into believers – so that God’s desired relationship can be returned to him, for he says, “And they will be my people, and I will be their God” – an assertion made in *just* the Old Testament at least 43 times. How have we experienced the Harvest this year both in body and in soul?

It is a great gift that God has given us, to be able to place our hope, our trust, and our faith in him. He has given us the food that never perishes so that we may continue to feed on his Word – that we might continue to grow closer to him both in body and in spirit. It is important to give thanks to him for all of the gifts of grace he has freely given us, and so it is really a never-ending task we have before us. I saw somewhere online this week somebody commented on a post saying, “Thanksgiving is great and everything, but Thanks-Living is really what it’s all about.” Thanks-Living. How do we live our lives so that we are constantly giving thanks to God for all the blessings we have in our lives? That, my friends, should be a never-ending task, and if we truly live that way it would change our outlook on the world tremendously. If we approached other people, any things, and our routines with thanks to God first and foremost on our lips, we would *only* be able to live lives that look entirely different than our society of excess and waste.

We thank God, we Bless God, for ever and ever, for as we say at every celebration of the Eucharist in the Prayer Book, “All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee”. Everything we have comes from God, and everything we offer to God is already his own. But to find our place of thanks – our place of humility – before God in all that we do and say, and to come and worship him, and to consume the Bread of Life of the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist is the right thing for us to do. For, whoever comes to him shall never hunger, and whoever believes in him shall never thirst.