Sunday 11 October – Harvest Festival – Emma Phillips

Readings: Joel 2.21-27 Matthew 6.25-33

I wonder if you have been able to go on getting out into your gardens and our lovely countryside? There is much that is beautiful, even now as we enter October. Colours are developing in the leaves—just looking out of the window now I can see ochre and rust, gold and lemon yellow, burnt orange and bright red, before my ability to name colours runs out! I’ve done a special trip to collect conkers—one of my favourite things. I love the moment of opening the prickly case and finding the shiny newness of the conker inside. Fields have been largely cleared of their summer crops, all safely gathered in, but farming doesn't stop—round us many fields are ready for overwintering sheep. The patchwork of colours and textures changes and evolves.

It’s still a time of productivity—wild animals are getting ready for the winter, squirrels digging holes in our lawn to hide acorns, wasps coming into our attics to hibernate (though only the queen will survive ‘til the spring) and hedgehogs fattening up. And everywhere plants setting and spreading seed. I picked seeds from over 30 different plants in just a quick trawl of the garden—all adapted to spread in different ways. Some are surrounded by luscious fruits, tempting animals to eat them and then deposit the seeds in droppings far from the parent plant. Others have little parachutes  to catch the wind and whirl into the distance. Some have explosive pods that shoot them away. Others have little hooks to catch a ride on a passing animal’s fur. Just looking at these seeds reminds us of the extraordinary diversity of creation. We don’t need the summer sun to consider the lilies—the natural world shouts out God’s presence in every season.

The Bible speaks in terms of the created world in almost every chapter. It makes it clear that God’s word is spoken in every part of his creation, from the tiniest particle to the vastness of the universe. Joel tells even the soil to rejoice as he foretells abundance. He uses the metaphor of a plague of locusts to stand for the suffering of God’s people, even as he promises restoration. Jesus too uses examples from the natural world in his parables—today the birds of the air and the weeds of the field. For the Biblical writers it would have been unthinkable to lose touch with nature—of course God’s purposes are writ large for everyone to see! But in our own world, some strange divides have appeared. Science has appeared to take over as the only way to understand nature, and humans have oddly ceased to be seen as part of the natural order, as if we somehow lived outside of it. Creation is celebrated in church only at Harvest. What has gone wrong? How can we be missing so much?

We have the Enlightenment to thank for the split between science and faith. Until the age of reason in the 18th century scientific exploration was seen as an obvious activity for people of faith. As God has created an ordered world it can be understood by human investigation, which will necessarily inspire us to worship God more.  But in the age of reason, logic reigned supreme and the evidence of our senses was taken to be more valid than the inspiration of faith. The church at the time was threatened by new ideas and a defensive schism occurred . Nowadays science is a lot more open to inspiration and does not attempt to explain everything, but the damage has been done. Many people assume that we cannot have both science and faith without wilfully ignoring one or the other. This is just not true! In church we need to reclaim the wonder of the created world as God’s word, both in its scientific principles and its wonderful beauty!

The church needs to admit that it is as responsible as the rest of the world for the misunderstanding that humans are set apart from creation, not part of the natural order. We have behaved as if God’s instruction to Adam to fill the earth and rule over it was an invitation to use up all the resources we have been given without a thought about the consequences. We have taken without giving back, as if there was a second or third earth waiting out there when everything is used up or spoilt on this one. But of course humans are a part of the created world and we are now being forced to see our impact and consider again how we can be stewards not consumers of all that God has given us.

As we struggle with the Covid pandemic, it is certainly time to change how we see nature! For many of us, the glorious weather of lockdown was a redeeming feature, and we noticed spring coming as never before. So let us take Jesus’ words seriously and consider the birds and the plants, expecting to hear his words as we do so. Let us pay attention, real proper attention, to the beauty around us. If God has set us in such a wonderful rich world, surely we can trust him not to abandon us? If his glory shines out in dew drops on a spider’s web, then can he not be seen in us, in the smiles between a parent and a child, in the tender care given and received at the end of a long life, in the cheerful greeting of a stranger?

So keep your eyes open! Expect to meet with Jesus in a break in the clouds when the rain stops and the sun pours down, in a bright red berry transforming the drabness of a hedge of dying leaves, in a little dog racing towards you bursting with enthusiasm. These are my experiences! You will find your own, even if it’s seen from the window or in a nature programme.

The natural world is not however relentlessly cheerful! Autumn brings its challenges. It’s colder and darker already. We are drawing the curtains at supper time, turning on the central heating and lighting a fire. And while that is nice in many ways, it’s hard not to be sad! In the context of the pandemic I think we are more easily depressed by the weather than we would normally be. We are missing so many things, so the end of the year seems more like a time of mourning than just the usual change of seasons. Whatever happened to summer? It hardly seemed to happen with so many restrictions. And now we are stuck indoors again without being able to gather with friends and family. The leaves falling seem to echo our loss, things coming to an end, life slowing down and going on hold. In fact I think we would all be glad to be able to hibernate until a vaccine is available! For the creatures and plants that keep going though the winter, the cold is challenging—just as the virus is challenging for those of you who don’t have the option of staying at home. Winter approaches, and it will be hard work.

Admitting that is important—we can’t keep up a brave face without acknowledging the loss and anxiety underneath. For some people it will be obvious—if you work in health care you are in the front line. If you keep essential service going you will know day by day that you risk catching the virus and you will know people who have caught it. If your job is under threat the challenge is acute and you will know that it is only by God’s grace that you can keep going. But for many of us, the threats are not so immediate. We go on with our daily lives but with masks and social distancing and hand washing, apparently unaffected in any important way. Only it’s not like that really, is it? Because the world outside our home has become a dangerous place. You have to wash your hands when you come in because outside there are scary germs. Other people, even people we love, have become potential sources of infection—we can’t get too close to them. Ordinary expressions of affection have disappeared—we are starved of touch. We have lost the smiles on peoples’ faces as they disappear behind masks. Half the time we can’t properly hear what they say, and making ourselves understood needs much more energy. This is not how we are supposed to function! These are serious losses that  eat away at our happiness, and we need to mourn them.

So I invite you to consider the acorn. There are plenty of them around at the moment, mostly brown and uninspiring. Solid capsules of stored energy and potential, though you would not know from looking at them! In autumn, their role is to detach from the parent tree and fall to the ground, inert and sealed. They lie on the ground through the winter doing nothing, and hopefully a squirrel will move them to a new site, or a mole will bury them. It is not until the soil warms that transformation takes place. Then all that promise is made good! Roots are followed by a shoot which pierces the ground looking for the sun, and a new tree begins to grow. Imagine holding an acorn now, and seeing it as holding all God’s promises to you—the promise from Joel that God will restore the years that the locust has eaten, Jesus’ promise that God will provide for you. You may not be able to see right now how these promises will be fulfilled, and indeed some of them may have to wait until we reach heaven, but we can be sure that just as the acorn contains all that potential, so do our lives when held in God’s hands.

The natural world works by seasons, and we can draw strength in knowing that spring will surely follow winter, just as the virus will eventually run its lethal course. Creation as a whole however has a destination, and doesn’t simply repeat itself. It is made by God in joy and love, and it will reach fulfilment at a time we cannot know. We are assured of this by Jesus’ death and resurrection. Sin is no longer dooming creation to ultimate destruction—death will not have the last word. We are Eater people in a world that God is constantly making new. We have a part to play in this—God did not set humanity apart from creation to plunder and spoil. As an integral part of creation we are to be stewards, to name and know the creatures and plants, the delicate balance of ecology, the amazing science of the universe, and to take proper care of it.

So while life is so strange, can we consider our own role in stewardship? Can we review our own lives in terms of our carbon footprint, our plastic use, how we play our part in recycling and renewing? This is not to add an extra burden in troubled times, but a response to the beauty of creation that surrounds us. It might even be a positive focus that helps us through the winter. Can we make and mend, repurpose or restore? Can we think of creative ways to share resources, or research effective ways to protest environmental destruction? Let me know if you are interested in joining a group to become an Eco Church, one which promotes the care of the world God has given us. There are real changes we can make do if we act together.

For now, go find yourselves an acorn, and stick it in your pocket. Every time your hand meets it, remember all the promise it holds. All the potential growth. All the hope for the future. Trust that God can do that it you too! Amen