

Harvest festival

A sermon preached at St Andrew's parish church, Guernsey, by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, on Sunday 3 October 2021

Readings: Joel 2 vv 21-27 and Matthew 6 vv 25-33

Responsibility for this morning's sermon lies firmly with our flower arrangers. I have no option but to preach about sunflowers.

This is a challenge, because there are no Biblical references to sunflowers. That's hardly surprising, because (according to my exhaustive research – well, a quick conversation with Google) sunflowers began to be cultivated between three to five thousand years ago in the Americas, mainly in the area covered today by Arizona and New Mexico.

Sunflowers had (and still have) a huge variety of uses. They were first cultivated as a food source, with the native Americans crushing the seeds to prepare flour for bread. The seeds were also eaten as a quick snack or mixed in with other grains to make what I suppose we might describe as a type of granola. The oil, extracted from the seeds, was used for cooking.

Sunflowers became popular around Europe, when they were introduced in the sixteenth century. They were particularly important in Russia. By the early 19th century Russian farmers were growing over 2 million acres of sunflowers.

The name is significant. Before blooming, sunflower plants tilt during the day to face the sun in order to gain more sunlight for photosynthesis. They are, literally, 'sun flowers'.

I must give you a health and safety warning. According to my research, some species of sunflower have a tendency to spread rapidly and can become aggressive. If you are sitting close to one of the displays, please report any aggression from the sunflowers to the churchwardens, who can bring order with their staves of office.

Given their size and beauty, it is hardly surprising that sunflowers have developed a particular symbolism. Growing up in the north of England, I don't remember seeing many sunflowers until I found fields of sunflowers growing in southern France. More recently, fields of sunflowers have become familiar in parts of England. In China, sunflowers symbolise long life, vitality and good luck. For native Americans, harvest and provision.

Vincent Van Gogh's paintings of sunflowers are among his most famous. He painted them in Arles, in the south of France, in 1888 and 1889. Van Gogh painted a total of five large canvases with sunflowers in a vase, with three shades of yellow 'and nothing else'. In this way, he demonstrated that it was possible to create an image with numerous variations of a single colour, without any loss of eloquence.

The sunflower paintings had a special significance for Van Gogh: for him, they communicated gratitude.

So, harvest and provision in north America. Gratitude for Van Gogh. Perhaps sunflowers do have something to tell us as we celebrate our harvest festival.

There are a number of layers to this festival.

Giving thanks for the harvest, with a time for celebration at the end of the annual cycle of hard physical labour for many is hard wired into the human psyche, and rightly so. The annual cycle of growth and production is a miracle, but one where human skill does much to enhance both productivity and quality. Agriculture is a highly professional industry, with huge reliance on scientists and computers, alongside the knowledge, often passed down the generations, of the characteristics of a particular area.

And yet, at least in the West and what we are pleased to describe as the developed countries, there is a great distance between consumers and producers than perhaps at any time in human history. We see a response to this distance from the land in the growing enthusiasm, at least in

some parts of Western society, for allotments and for some modest production of food for personal consumption, be it a vegetable garden, fruit trees or chickens; and with excess shared with neighbours or, at least here in Guernsey, on hedge veg stalls.

But for Christians, this doesn't tell the whole story. The world in which we live, this fragile, beautiful planet, the delicacy of which perhaps we only really began to appreciate when we saw those pictures from early spacecraft in orbit, is a sacred trust. The Genesis stories of creation are not history as we know it, or biology, but theology. They tell us about God – and about the intricate beauty of God's creation and about how that is entrusted to human beings, even though they make a mess of their responsibilities from the very start. We are not owners of creation, but stewards, not simply allowed to enjoy this precious creation but with huge and weighty responsibilities to hand on the gift we have received to the next generation. In the last century and this, we have failed in our stewardship. Jesus tells many stories about bad stewards; they are stories, warning, that we should heed.

That is why the concern of recent years for the protection of our planet and its environment is so important. It is too late to save some of the species which have become extinct, plants and birds, insects and animals. Each extinct species is a little death, which we should all mourn.

COP26, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, which will begin in Glasgow on 31 October, will demand much of us, and of others who enjoy the prosperity denied to millions of people throughout the world.

There is, of course, a degree of self-interest. If we continue as we are, temperatures will carry on rising, bringing even more catastrophic flooding, bush fires, extreme weather and destruction of species.

To deliver on the stretching targets to reduce toxic emissions, countries will need to accelerate the phase-out of coal, curtail deforestation, speed up the switch to electric vehicles, and encourage investment in renewables.

We will need to work together to enable and encourage countries affected by climate change to protect and restore ecosystems, some already fragile, some damaged almost beyond repair; and to build defences, warning systems and resilient infrastructure and agriculture to avoid loss of homes, livelihoods and even lives. Even here in Guernsey, homes and habitats will be lost if the sea levels rise above a certain point.

This will be expensive, and costly - not just in cash, but in change of attitudes. We will need unprecedented collaboration between governments, businesses and civil society.

This is what God asks of us, because he has given us the world – on loan, to be handed over as a better place to those who come after us.

'Do not fear, you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;
the tree bears its fruit,
the fig tree and vine give their full yield.

The threshing-floors shall be full of grain,
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.'

So writes the prophet Joel. Would he be so optimistic today? Even if the Rectory fig trees produced no fruit this year, there were apples and pears in abundance. But for how long will this last?

Jesus says, 'From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.'

Sunflowers speak of harvest and provision to the native people of north America. Gratitude for Van Gogh. Yes, to both of those. And for us? As the sunflowers turn to the sun for the energy they

need, so we are invited to turn, in penitence, to God and commit ourselves to be better stewards of this precious planet.