

Sunday 6 October – Harvest Festival

Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Do not worry about your life

I typed “Top 10 things people worry about” into an internet search engine to see what came up. The top four were not very surprising: money, health, jobs and relationships. From today’s Gospel reading, it would seem the top 3 worries in Jesus’ day were food, drink and clothing. These are pretty basic needs. They might come out top of the list or certainly near the top of it for many people today as well: homeless people, refugees, people living in extreme poverty might be worried about where their next meal is coming from, where they can find clean water to drink and how they can keep themselves and their children adequately protected from the weather.

I have recently read a book about the experiences of young women in refugee families. One girl spoke of her amazement, on arriving in the USA and being taken to the house provided for her family by a refugee charity, of being able to turn on a tap and have clean water come out of it. She was even more astonished to find that there was more than one tap in the house. She was used to having to walk for hours to access water that was safe to drink. We take it pretty much for granted that we can turn on the tap and water will come out of it. There is outrage on social media if the water is cut off for a few hours when there is a leak somewhere. We are not used to having to worry about water. There was a news story a few days ago from a community badly hit by Hurricane Helene in the USA where people whose homes were flooded had discovered a stranded lorry full of bottles of water. They started helping themselves until the police turned up and told them they were stealing. It’s ironic, isn’t it? There was water everywhere, but nothing they could drink. These were people who were not used to needing to worry about what to drink.

Most of us probably don’t worry all that much about what we are going to eat either. We might stand gazing into the fridge hoping something might jump out and cook itself sometimes, but the chances are there will be something in the fridge. If there isn’t much, it’s usually possible to go to the shops and buy something. I say “usually” because we all now remember the spring of

2020 when it was impossible to buy pasta or toilet roll. Yet even that was not a catastrophe (well, the toilet roll possibly was if you were unlucky enough to run out). There were things to eat other than pasta.

We live in a time and a place when most of us have unprecedented access to food. We can eat more or less whatever we like all year round. If there is a poor harvest, prices might go up, but we don't expect to be starving by April. Our ancestors lived in a very different world. For centuries, people have had every reason to be worried about food. Even today, around a billion people live on less than a dollar a day, which is the internationally recognised threshold for extreme poverty. One billion. For most of human history, people have lived pretty much a hand to mouth existence. It was difficult to store food or to transport it very far. Growing enough food for the community was hard work. Everything was weather-dependent and weather forecasting was even more of an imprecise science than it is now. If a harvest was poor, people would go hungry. Malnutrition was common and the most vulnerable – the very young, the very elderly and those who were already unwell – would be at serious risk of starvation.

It is hard for us to imagine, if we have never experienced it for ourselves, what it is like to live without guaranteed access to clean water and enough food. For ordinary people in Jesus' day, neither of these things could be taken for granted. And yet Jesus says, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." People are not to worry, he says, because their heavenly Father knows that they need these things.

If you had been in the crowd that day, how might you have responded to Jesus' words? "Well, that's easier said than done, Jesus. Is my heavenly Father going to walk three hours to the well to fill the water jar for me? Where do you think I am going to get enough flour to feed my family? And if I can't afford to buy grain, what chance is there of buying cloth to make new clothes as the children grow taller? How am I supposed not to worry?"

I was interested to note that the fifth thing on the list of the top ten things people worry about is anxiety. People are worried about worry itself. Worrying is a very common human occupation. We all do it at times. Jesus points out that worrying is not, in itself, very productive. Worrying doesn't make you live longer. Worrying doesn't generally solve any of the problems

you are worrying about. Worry is natural and normal, but it doesn't get us very far unless it spurs people to action.

What does Jesus suggest we do instead? "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness," he says, "and all these things will be given to you as well." Is it really that simple? If I make the work of God's kingdom my top priority, will everything else just fall into my lap? How does that work? On an individual level, it generally doesn't, but what if Jesus is speaking to a community rather than an individual? What if Jesus is suggesting that, if an entire community strives for the things of God's kingdom, there will be enough to meet the needs of everyone?

There is enough food to feed the world's population, even today when there are so many people worldwide. The problem is that the food is not evenly distributed. According to the World Food Programme, nearly a fifth of all food produced worldwide goes to waste. That's one billion meals a day. That's one meal for each of the one billion people living on less than a dollar a day. Food waste is estimated to generate up to 10 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Sixty per cent of the waste happens at household level. That's when we throw away food that we haven't eaten. And that's just the food we are not eating. Many of us in the developed world eat more than we actually need to. We create health problems by eating too much of the wrong kinds of food.

What might it mean for a community to strive for God's kingdom? If we all focused on justice, care for the vulnerable, love of our neighbour, lives directed towards the worship of God, if these were the top four things we worried about, how might the world look different? If we all concerned ourselves more with these things maybe no one would need to worry about what they were going to eat, because there would always be enough and it would be shared out fairly for everyone.

It's a call to change the whole way that we think. It's still easier said than done. It starts in small ways. It starts with us being mindful of what we really need and not taking too much. It starts with making a commitment not to buy more than we can use and not to throw food away. It starts with us noticing what others don't have and wondering how we can turn our surplus into their necessities. It's getting easier all the time. In Tiptree we now have the Community Hub and the food bank. Have you ever visited either? How carefully do we think about what we buy? Can we support producers

committed to fair wages, environmental standards, putting something back into the communities where our food is grown or manufactured? Are we willing to pay a little more if that means someone else earns enough to live on? How do we respond when a news story comes to light about a company using slave labour or allowing people to work in unsafe conditions? Do we carry on shopping there anyway?

You may think your actions won't make a difference. Well, if we all think like that, we will all be right. But what if we all started trying to do things differently? What if we all put justice, care for the vulnerable, love of our neighbour, care for God's created world at the top of our list of priorities? What might we do differently? If we strive first for the kingdom of God, all these things will be given to us as well. We will not need to worry about what we will eat, what we will drink, what we will wear, and neither will anyone else.